

STITCHING SELVES:
PERFORMING EMPOWERMENT IN A COMMUNITY SEWING CIRCLE

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon critical interpretive medical anthropology (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996) and Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, this thesis investigates the empowerment potential and effect on well-being of a community sewing group located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. This project was conducted using the methods of narrative ethnography, including semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups, and participant observation and finds that the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre Sewing Circle contributes to well-being in three major ways. First, learning to sew shapes women's self-perceptions, resulting in more capable, productive, and self-sufficient subjectivities. Learning to sew also enables women to act with more agency in their daily lives, empowering them through the opportunity to express identities, enhance social networks, and act within financial limitations. Finally, the Sewing Circle creates an environment of empowerment, an emotionally and physically safe space in which mothers are supported and nurtured, resulting in the formation of a supportive and encouraging community of practice. The Sewing Circle therefore supports women's well-being by instilling them with the confidence and ability to act in their daily lives and to fulfill their potential. This research contributes to an understanding of the way in which sewing can contribute to the holistic well-being of older mothers by linking empowerment to performativity, and may contribute to the development of similar empowerment programming in the future.

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DEDICATION

For my mother and father, for all of their love and support, and for instilling in me throughout my life their infectious, insatiable curiosity.

And for Carl, my constant inspiration.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment throughout history has come from a variety of sources. Over the twentieth century, developing from the early but breakthrough successes of suffrage movements to the intersectionality, diversity, and breadth of third-wave feminism, "Western women, as a group, have overcome their historical construction as Other to a significant degree. They have won the right to exercise their freedom as men do in our society, shrugging off their historical dependence and subservience, and developing their capacities for choice, responsibility, and autonomous, self-directed activity" (Power 2005:656). However, such a characterization obscures the lived reality of many women who remain marginalized by class, ethnicity, age, or ability. Women who are mothers are often further subject to both the unattainable demands of idealized motherhood and the identification of productive personhood with paid labor, with impacts on their well-being. If, as Weisner argues, well-being depends on "engaged participation in everyday cultural activities that are deemed desirable by a community, and the psychological experiences produced by such engagement" (2009:229), the inability to fulfill the tasks women feel are required of them may lead to feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and lowered self-esteem. This has consequences for their mental, emotional, and social well-being.

However, "everyday life has often, in women's history, been a source of identity and self-worth" (Gillis and Hollows 2009:5). Household tasks such as caring for children, cooking meals, and beautifying a home have long been a source of pride and purpose for women, allowing them to express their identities while tending to their responsibilities within structural demands. In particular, the practice of textile arts, such as knitting, sewing, crocheting, and embroidery, has the potential to serve as a site of power, allowing women to exert control over their environment, communicate social bonds, negotiate how they present themselves in their social environment,

and care for their families in a meaningful way. In this way, women become more able to manage the demands placed on them, helping them to sustain a life that supports their sense of self and their well-being. Furthermore, if, as Judith Butler (1990) argues, identity is constructed through performance, learning to perform differently through skill development may not only increase women's abilities, but also shape their self-perceptions and subjectivities. Particularly for marginalized women, for whom opportunities for identity construction through paid labor or other socially defined productivity is often lacking, developing skill in textile arts can be seen as a form of empowerment, providing a level of control over identity and the physical and social environment and increasing women's capacity to act. As Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood state, "needlework activities can be viewed as providing...a space in which to stitch not only a seam but also a self" (2009:27).

For women in the core neighborhoods of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the chance to address marginalization and improve well-being through textile skill development may be particularly beneficial. These neighborhoods bear an excessive burden of poverty and ill health, and their residents are often both socioeconomically and ethnically marginalized. Furthermore, with higher rates of teenage pregnancy, infant mortality, and lone parent families than in Saskatoon as a whole, this burden falls disproportionately upon mothers and their children (Neudorf et al. 2009), a group already burdened by the systematic devaluation of mothers and the unpaid labor of mothering.

In response to these issues and to women's calls for a place to go within the core neighborhoods of Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre opened in 2010. The Mothers' Centre offers a drop-in centre four days a week, a Sewing Circle program on Thursday evenings, and various special events throughout the year, including holiday parties and celebrations for

International Women's Day. More recently, the Centre has established a knitting program and Alphabet Soup, a play program intended to promote literacy for small children. Based on the model of the Mothers International Network for Empowerment, the Mothers' Centre is

centred on the belief that in an atmosphere and culture that values women, children, and families, fosters deep connections among women, embraces ambiguity and diverse viewpoints rather than insisting on the one 'right' way, and raises women's voices, mothers can become experts on the developmental and social needs of themselves and their families. [Slepian, in O'Reilly 2013:192]

In the fall of 2013, in response to the requirements of the grant program funding the Sewing Circle, the Mothers' Centre approached my supervisor, medical anthropologist Dr. Pamela Downe, to conduct an evaluation of the program. This provided me with the opportunity to contribute to the funding and ongoing functioning of a community organization while investigating the empowerment potential of the Sewing Circle, a program whose historical antecedents have long been an overlooked source of identity and self-esteem in the everyday lives of women (Gordon 2004; Strawn 2009; McLean 2009). This program, intended to provide a supportive environment for women, improve their economic circumstances, improve their self-esteem, self-sufficiency, and self-confidence, and model positive parenting, has the potential to empower women and thereby contribute to their well-being, but the extent to which these benefits are perceived by participants is not known.

1.1 Research Questions

In line with the stated goals of the Sewing Circle, in this research I explore the following question: how, and to what extent, does the Sewing Circle contribute to mothers' perceptions of well-being, especially through the development of agency, empowerment, and social cohesion? To address this question, I also investigate the way in which participants in the Sewing Circle understand and promote their own well-being and that of their families. If, as Kleinman argues "a central concern in ethnography should be the interpretation of what is at stake for particular

participants in particular situations” (1995:98), understanding women’s priorities and desires for themselves and their families can create a clearer picture of how social programming like the Sewing Circle can align with these priorities to promote well-being. In addition, answering this research question requires an investigation of the motivations of participants for attending the Sewing Circle, and the benefits they perceive of participation and of learning to sew. This allows me to identify what needs the Sewing Circle fulfills, both within the confines of the sewing sessions and outside of the Sewing Circle into participants’ home life, self-perception, and well-being. Finally, although the Mothers’ Centre and the Sewing Circle provide many of the same social support benefits, I was interested to learn how their impact may differ. Understanding the way in which the benefits of a semi-structured skill-development program and a flexible, relaxed social support program differ can inform the development of programming in the future, allowing program developers to tailor programming more easily and effectively to the needs of their target group.

Drawing upon Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity to theorize the way in which learning can shape women’s subjectivities, in this thesis I argue that learning to sew in a community sewing group can foster mothers’ well-being by creating the opportunity to perform alternative mother subjectivities, increasing their ability to act within the circumstances of their daily lives and enabling them to fulfill the tasks they consider important in their roles both as mothers and as individuals. To do this, I examine the impact of learning to sew on women’s self-perceptions, resulting from both the process of sewing, including a sense of productivity, self-sufficiency, and the ability to overcome personal barriers, and its products, including enhanced personal social networks through gift-giving and the opportunity to express and negotiate multiple identities. I then demonstrate that the Saskatoon Mothers’ Centre Sewing Circle has led

to the formation of an intergenerational, multicultural, matricentric community of practice based on sewing which serves as a site of personal development, supporting the development of more capable, effective, and empowered subjectivities through the provision of social support and a sense of community. In this environment, more empowered mother subjectivities are promoted through the opportunity to engage with the physical world and the social environment in new ways, supporting alternative mother performances that nurture both women's mother and individual identities. The combination of empowering social networks and skill development promoted by the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre Sewing Circle therefore has the potential to empower, validate, and strengthen women to perform a different kind of motherhood, improving their well-being by helping them to fulfill their roles and potentials and building their confidence in their ability to do so.

1.2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

1.2.1 Critical-Interpretive Medical Anthropology

I approach this thesis from the perspective of critical interpretive medical anthropology, which posits that all social life is constructed and experienced through what Marcus and Fisher call the continuous "negotiation of meanings" (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996:43). In particular, it is concerned with the dynamic and ongoing construction of knowledge relating to health and the human body, the impact such knowledge has on individual lives, and the role that it plays in upholding dominant cultural patterns. Central to this theory is the concept of embodied personhood, or "the relationship of cultural beliefs and practices in connection with health and illness to the sentient human body" (1996:44). While the materiality of the body cannot be denied, it is both physical and symbolic, naturally produced but culturally shaped within a particular social and historic context (Lock and Scheper Hughes 1987). The materiality of the body, the social discourses and meanings related to it, and the embodied person "contained"

within it are mutually constructing and do not exist apart from each other, but instead form a coherent and dynamic whole. According to Butler, “the sense that the body is ‘natural’ is itself a byproduct of discourse about bodily materiality” (Joyce 2006:51), and as Lock and Scheper-Hughes argue, “the structure of individual and collective sentiments down to the ‘feel’ of one’s body and the naturalness of one’s position and role in the technical order is a social construct” (1987:23). Discourses around the body therefore shape the subject, including its potential, its responsibilities, and the opportunities open to it.

Through interaction between the body and the social environment, political, economic, and social forces are somaticized and embodied (Singer 1998), interacting with biological forces to shape the patterns of health, well-being, and illness that appear in a society. Lock and Scheper-Hughes’ concept of the body politic, or the “the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective) in reproduction in sexuality, in work and in leisure, in sickness and other forms of deviance and human difference...in the service of some definition of collective stability, health, and social well-being” (1987:8), suggests that the embodied person’s movements, lifestyles, and choices are governed by structural forces as a way of promoting certain values. This governance often results in patterns of health among the population. For example, the common Canadian perception of health as an achievement and a moral good, a goal to be pursued by each individual through exercise, nutritious food, and avoiding bad habits, is the result of the values of individualism, militarism, and meritocracy (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987). These values are complicated by neoliberalism, whose requirement for ideal economic citizens contrasts with the need for self-control and self-discipline, and Lock and Scheper-Hughes (1987) argue that this conflict may manifest in health issues such as bulimia.

While biomedicine prioritizes biological health and assumes its universal applicability, “critically interpretive medical anthropologists are confronted with rebellious and ‘anarchic’ bodies - bodies that refuse to conform (or submit) to presumably universal categories and concepts of diseases, distress, and medical efficacy” (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1996:43). These non-conformities often highlight sites of discordance between individual values and those of the larger society. As Lock and Scheper Hughes (1996) argue, social inequalities are institutionalized through dominant cultural ideologies, which naturalize certain ways of being and render others abnormal. This process “is likely to inflict a negative self-image, distress, and often ill health on the underprivileged and disenfranchised” (1996:44), compounding their marginalized position. Critical-interpretive medical anthropology, therefore, attempts to bring to light the meanings that come to be associated with health, illness, and the body and demonstrate how these meanings uphold dominant cultural patterns, serving as a form of power which disciplines and shapes the actions of individuals (Foucault 1982). In this thesis I am concerned with the impact of cultural meanings of the body on the well-being of mothers, those members of society whose social role is arguably most intricately tied to their biological role, and the way in which the negotiation of social roles and meanings through grassroots community programming may be used to empower and revalue them. An emphasis on the well-being of mothers beyond their biomedical health will demonstrate how the cultural construction of meanings regarding motherhood impacts not only mothers’ biological health, but also their well-being, including their sense of meaning, their prospects for the future, and their sense of self-worth, efficacy, and agency by shaping their subjectivity.

1.2.2 Subjectivity and Performativity

Because “emotions entail both feelings and cognitive orientations, public morality, and cultural ideology” (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987:26), they serve as an intersection between

the body and its sociopolitical context. Subjectivity, as defined by Sherry Ortner, describes the “ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects” (2005:31), with the understanding that these emotions and ways of perceiving the world are shaped by social and cultural forces that are outside of the individual’s control. Actors are never entirely free to choose, but neither are their actions entirely dictated by outside structures. Rejecting the social constructivist notion that individuals are entirely the products of their contexts, the concept of subjectivity “connotes creativity, the possibility of a subject’s adopting a distinctive symbolic relation to the world in order to understand lived experience” (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007:6). Rather than existing as the inevitable products of their position in society, the subject partially internalizes the social context and is also able, to some extent, to reflect upon it and react to it. This means that individuals will react differently to their contexts and circumstances, and act differently within them, influencing their sense of life satisfaction and well-being. As Biehl, Good, and Kleinman argue, “our subjectivity orchestrates a field of defeats and achievements into value-feeling states of hope and hopelessness, robustness and demoralization, inefficacy and competence” (2007:14-15). It is through the combination of structural influences and individual reactions to them that subjectivity develops.

This means that subjectivity develops through performance, which “involves public, repetitive actions of movement, gesture, posture, dress, labor, production, interaction with objects, and the manipulation of space” (Joyce 2006:51). These performances are shaped by social and political structures, naturalizing some performances and subjects while leaving others deviant or even impossible. Judith Butler labels this process “performativity,” and notes that these

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body....Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to

express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. [1990:173]

Describing identity as a fabrication does not deny individual subjectivity but instead indicates that the individual is, from birth, shaped and governed by their social context, and the actions they choose are never free from social influence. Rather than referring to a prediscursive and inherent self, “identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction” (Butler 1990:176). The “original” is an unobtainable ideal that may only be imitated, never achieved.

While Perry and Potter caution that performativity may be read as rejecting agency, reducing “all possibilities for resistance to discursive, sadomasochistic parodies of dominant categories” (2006:115), Butler argues instead that “the possibilities of...transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a deformity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (1990:179). It is through altering performance, the “failure to repeat,” that an individual’s role, possibilities, and sense of self may change, and agency emerges from the possibility of varying performance. In fact,

paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary. [1990:187]

Through the social construction of identity, agency enters the realm of possibility, rendering particular choices intelligible within a specific social context. Agency exists in the form of varying the repetition of culturally intelligible actions.

This means that while hegemonic discourses cannot be avoided, they do not preclude the individual's ability to change their actions to some extent, thereby shaping their own identity. As Ortner notes “a *fully cultural* consciousness is at the same time always *multi-layered and reflexive*, and its complexity and reflexivity constitute the grounds for questioning and criticizing the world in which we find ourselves” (2005:46, emphasis added). Under the constraints and demands of society, subjects can reflect on their performances, challenge them, and, to some extent, alter their repetitions toward more liberating and validating options. Furthermore, “the habitual, embodied, performative processes that construct gender and other identities through time result in a certain dissonance in the form of abject or ambiguous individuals that fail – in some performative dimension – to achieve the ideal” (Perry and Potter 2006:118), resulting in marginalized subjectivities. It is in these areas of discordance that oppressive structures come to light. Stripped of the performances that naturalize them, institutions can be examined and challenged. For scholars, “failed repetitions” become a site at which oppressive structures can be identified, creating the possibility of changing them (Foucault 1982; Perry and Potter 2006). On an individual level, the performative nature of subjectivity creates opportunities for empowerment. As Luce Irigaray states, “one must assume the feminine role deliberately...which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it” (Baert 1998:79). Because subjectivity is based on actions, it is also based, to some extent, on choice.

1.2.3 Well-being

Concordance or discordance between the subject and their context also has implications for the study of well-being, defined by Pollard and Rosenberg as

A state of successful performance throughout the lifecourse integrating physical, cognitive, and social-emotional function that results in productive activities deemed significant by one's cultural community, fulfilling social relationships, and the ability to

transcend moderate psychological and environmental problems. Well-being also has a subjective dimension in the sense of satisfaction associated with fulfilling one's potential. [Izquierdo 2005:77]

Like subjectivity, well-being is constituted not from the individual or social context alone but from the dynamic interplay between them. Context is never static. The result of a multitude of cultural and historical forces and factors, concepts of well-being are continuously shifting (Adelson 1998) and reflect the daily requirements of a shifting social environment. For the Whapmagoostui Cree of Quebec, for instance, well-being once depended upon a connection to the land and the maintenance of a healthy subsistence livelihood. With the transition to a market economy and increasing contact with mainstream Canadian society, however, "Cree well-being is construed less in terms of living on the land than as an abstraction as part of an active engagement in 'being Cree' and against what is understood as being non-Cree" (Adelson 2009:121). Particularly for youth, with increased interaction with mainstream Canadian society and declining opportunities to live a more traditional lifestyle, "well-being...is not defined so much by what they are doing, as by how well they can tack between the varying worlds in which they live" (2009:120). The ability to function and adapt in a changing world which demands multiple roles and identities is key for these young people to live successfully.

Because of its ever-shifting nature, its differences between varying social roles and sectors of society, and its dependence on individual experience and agency, attempting to define well-being narrowly may obscure the way in which concordance or discordance with cultural norms and values impacts the individual's sense of well-being. Particularly with improved and ever-increasing communication between groups across the globe, individuals do not draw solely upon a cohesive and consistent set of values but instead "are part of an array of different communities, to varying degrees, and have access to a range of information and identities beyond those explicitly proffered by their own societies" (Mathews and Izquierdo 2009:257). Because of this,

individuals' concepts of themselves, their desires and hopes for themselves and their families, and the values they draw upon to construct their sense of well-being may differ from those of the larger society in which they live. Such discordance may impact their ability to achieve a sense of well-being, and according to Colby, "if we seek to describe 'a culture' as a unit, a set of values in some coherent configuration, we will miss the effects of conflicts and disharmonies within the society that holds that culture" (2009:57). Derné argues that "well-being arises from a fit between a person's aspirations and a person's accomplishments, but we must recognize that aspirations are shaped by macro-level cultural ideas, while the possibility of achievement is shaped by macro-level social structures" (2009:143). Therefore, changes in the values and ideals of a society, without corresponding changes in the social structures that support these values, can lead to discordance between one's values, one's society's values, and one's life circumstances, and therefore impact well-being (Derné 2009).

Health status and perceptions of well- or ill-being, therefore, are not neutral but instead are often the result of conflicts between the needs and values of individuals and the structural limitations of their context and environment. Ill health becomes a site of "resistance," which can be used "as a chemical catalyst to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used" (Foucault 1982:780). Differences in health and well-being therefore provide an opportunity to explore the structural forces and cultural values, norms, and assumptions that foster them. Particularly for groups marginalized from the mainstream of their society by gender, ethnicity, ability, age, or other factors, whose experience cannot be isolated from bodily realities, "varieties of health may become...the means by which a person, through his or her body, is involved in the dynamic balancing of power between the state, the disenfranchised group, and the individual" (Adelson 1998:17). Recognizing that health

inequities result from conflicts between the needs of the individual and the demands of his or her context enables the identification of the forces that prevent the achievement of well-being. In this way, “health is anything but silent” (1998:18), instead becoming a tool through which power differentials and structural inequities can be recognized.

1.2.4 Motherhood

In Canada, one site of such conflict between cultural ideals, structural forces, and everyday realities is represented by what O’Reilly (2010) calls the “institution of motherhood,” the set of often unrealistic ideals of motherhood that all mothers are expected to achieve. Motherhood as an institution is based on gender essentialism, which naturalizes the position of women in the home and denaturalizes achievement outside of the home (O’Reilly 2010) by tying cultural roles and expectations to biological realities. As Glenn contends,

Perhaps because the gendered allocation of mothering appears to flow inevitably from the division based on reproductive functioning, mothering – more than any other aspect of gender – has been subject to essentialist interpretation: seen as natural, universal, and unchanging. Indeed, for most of the twentieth century an idealized model of motherhood, derived from the situation of the white, American middle class, has been projected as universal. In this model, responsibility for mothering rests almost exclusively on one woman (the biological mother), for whom it constitutes the primary if not sole mission during the child’s formative years. [Glenn 1994:3]

This essentialism, which represents all normal motherhood as a necessarily single-minded devotion, has implications for women’s self-image and sense of possibility. According to Foucault, power, in this case in the form of hegemonic ideology, “categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, [and] imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (1982:781). Through a hegemonic discourse of ideal motherhood, mothers are tied to the identity of “mother” not through force but through a naturalized understanding of the self (1982:781). Therefore, “by depicting motherhood as natural, a patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into

biological reproduction and denies them identities and selfhood outside mothering” (Glenn 1994:9). The inflexibility of this ideal identity is harmful to women’s sense of self, limiting their life options and devaluing their work both inside and outside of the home.

The idealization of the institution of motherhood, in which a woman’s sense of self is subjugated in favor of her relationship to her children, is particularly harmful when combined with another tenet of mainstream Canadian ideology: individualism. Mainstream Canadian society has maintained the ideal of the singularly devoted, stay-at-home mother, despite the rise of the often conflicting value of individual female career achievement, the rise in single motherhood demanding a parent who is both mother and breadwinner, and, in two parent families, the declining economic viability of stay-at-home motherhood. These conflicts, combined with a lack of structural support such as reliable and inexpensive childcare and paid parental leave, make the performance of both culturally ideal motherhood and “womanhood” difficult or impossible, potentially leading to a sense of inadequacy, guilt, and dissatisfaction (O’Reilly 2013) in multiple areas of life. Women are expected to be completely devoted to their children and, conversely, to their own individual achievement, and in this way “liberation itself constitutes a constraint to which the individual is tied” (Chandler 1998:277). As Chandler describes:

Although persons are not only autonomous, unitary, separated individuals but rather fundamentally, and at every level, encumbered; nonetheless, much modern western philosophy not only posits the self as separated, but esteems this separation as the basis of ‘freedom’.... Freedom, understood in this sense, is a fallacy – the esteeming of which constitutes one of the factors that enables and perpetuates the devalued status of the blatantly encumbered: mothers. [1998:272]

Because mothers are inherently “in-relation” with another person, Chandler argues that achieving the level of independence and autonomy valued by Canadian society is impossible: “when one mothers one is both plural and less than singular” (1998:277), inseparable from the duo that

comprises a singular whole. For the “blatantly encumbered,” therefore, a societal value of freedom from others is inherently harmful, marginalizing and devaluing the “self-in-relation.” While the values of independence and motherhood are not mutually exclusive, it is nearly impossible to achieve either fully without detriment to the other, often leaving the mother feeling unsatisfied and inadequate in both domains and devaluing her contribution to society. As Chandler laments:

When I assert that a revaluing of motherhood is in order, I speak as a mother forced to put her child into daycare at too early an age...I speak as a mother forced by emancipation to wrench my child from me, to, day after day, compartmentalize my child away, so I could pretend for eight hours that I was an individual. That is the price, for many mothers, of autonomy, of freedom, of movement, or speech...and that is a price which is too high to pay. [Chandler 1998:280]

It is not, therefore, either motherhood or independence that is harmful to women’s identities, but instead the inflexible idealization of each to the detriment of the other. As Chandler argues, “that maternity ‘robs’ one of subjectivity is not at issue; that the subjectivity one is ‘robbed’ of through maternity is equated with an unquestioningly privileged emancipation is the more accurate site of mother-subordination” (1998:278-279).

To overcome the harmful contradiction between individualism and motherhood, empowering mothers requires that alternate subjectivities, which Chandler dubs “motherselfhoods” (1998:284), be accepted, supported, and honoured. Rather than denying either motherhood or individualism in favor of the other, Chandler argues that mothers must demand economic, political, and social respect for their role as mothers, establishing space for new, legitimate mother subjectivities. The friction between the multiple selves of mothers is inevitable, but not necessarily harmful (Kinser 2008). As Stéphanie Genz suggests, “we need to get away from laments about women’s dividedness toward a recognition of their contradictory and characteristic wholeness” (2009:59), acknowledging their multiple roles and contributions “as

inherent, and necessary, and not in need of fixing” (Kinser 2008:124). Mothering need not be oppressive. Because mothering plays a central role in many women’s lives as the source of many of their needs, goals, and desires for the future, emphasizing their reproductive role can be empowering, enabling women’s needs to be met and their work to be valued. According to O’Reilly, “if freed from motherhood, mothering could be experienced as a site of empowerment and as a location of social change” (2010:367), revaluing the work that women do and reaffirming their place in society. Because, as Chandler argues, “‘mother’ is best understood as a verb, as something one does, a practice which creates one’s identity as intertwined, interconnected, and in-relation” (1998:273), “motherselfhoods” can be promoted by creating opportunities to perform motherhood in alternative ways.

1.2.5 Crafting Feminism

Learning to perform alternative mother subjectivities requires learning new ways of interacting with the world as an embodied individual. Because “power is inscribed upon our bodies” (Luhmann 2006:359), learning to use the body differently, in ways that subvert the boundaries and meanings placed on it, is a way to redefine the potential of the embodied person. According to Scheper-Hughes and Lock, the Western assumption of a dualism between mind and body has created an epidemic of body alienation, and therefore “we live in a world in which the human shape of things (and even the human shape of humans with their mechanical hearts and plastic hips) is in retreat” (1987:23). While such a distinction may be sustainable for some, an emphasis on mental processes reduces individuals’ sense of wholeness and jeopardizes the self-image of those whose bodies, thanks to illness, disability, gender, age, or race, cannot be easily separated from their experience of the world. According to Rosemary Joyce, “subjectivity must be examined in relation to diverse bodily experiences, some of them only possible for those who possess particularly biological characteristics....Engagement with...difference requires

acknowledging the differential potentials of distinct biologies for experience, symbolization, and embodiment” (2006:47). Markowitz (1994) further argues that the privileging of mental over physical processes, which she terms “somatophobia,” is a driving force behind sexism and racism. The revaluation of the body and its capacities, therefore, could be expected to improve the self-image of those whose experience is so intimately tied to the experience of their own body. Valuing the work of the body may be particularly important for mothers, and for those marginalized by gender, race, or age.

The production of an object through craft, or the production of handmade, typically utilitarian products (Metcalf 2007), is one way of placing value back into the body, and therefore into embodied selves. In Metcalf’s words, “the hand molding clay, hand holding a mallet and chisel, the hand touching fabric, the object taking shape when before there was nothing but formless mud or wood or thread – craft diverts experience back to the physical....It is a statement that we still live in a body rich in potential” (Metcalf 2007:25). While practicing a craft, mind and body must work together (Shiner 2007), rectifying body alienation. Furthermore, craft products endure as “signs of the laboring self” (Joyce 2006:54) or objects in which the consciousness of the producer can be recognized. The connection between mind and body means that craft is both physical and symbolic and “fastens the concrete and the abstract into a material symbol” (Bratich and Brush 2007:20). Because it materializes in a tangible, external product, craft serves as a representation of the individual to others in their social network, allowing the craftsperson to see him or herself reflected in the affirmation, appreciation, and acceptance of others and creating an opportunity for identity production. Craft functions as a projection of not only the hands of the worker but also their embodied subjectivity, and “consumers intuitively read the uniqueness of the handmade object as a tangible analogue of their own singularity: the marks of hand

fabrication symbolize the uniqueness of an individual life” (Metcalf 2007:21). Through craft production, these individual lives are recognized, validated, and often cherished. Furthermore, according to Prentice, “disciplining the body into a particular craft is...a process of incorporating (or ‘taking into the body’) the ideologies of *work* that structure skill’s meaning and practice” (2008:55). As a craft is practiced, its meanings are incorporated into the embodied individual, and over time, this repeated performance shapes the subjectivity of the craftsperson.

Feminism has long maintained an ambivalent stance toward sewing, due to what Parker calls the craft’s “dual face”: “historically, throughout the centuries, it has provided both a weapon of resistance for women and functioned as a source of constraint. It has promoted submission to the norms of feminine obedience and offered both psychological and practical means to independence” (2010:xix). While women have been associated with the private realm since the 17th century (Bratich and Brush 2007), in the late 18th century industrialization further divided the home from work, and the tasks of production from those of reproduction. This division “played a central role in creating new forms of gender inequality and domesticity emerged as an ideology that legitimated these new gender inequalities” (Gillis and Hollows 2009:3). Exclusion from the economic world made women economically dependent on men and reaffirmed their responsibilities as wives and mothers (Gillis and Hollows 2009) while simultaneously devaluing their unpaid labor. One consequence of this devaluation is the minimization of the significance of women’s household work in the historical record. However, throughout history women have drawn identity and self-worth from their daily work, subversively shaping selves within structural constraints. Sewing and other textile arts have long served as a way for women to sculpt their self-presentation, impact their household budget, manage and maintain social networks, present an image of economic prosperity, negotiate dress codes, acquire recognition of

their skills and contributions, and express their love for their children. Furthermore, when these crafts are done in groups, such as the knitting groups evident in American literature back to the colonial period (Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 2009) or the Abolitionist sewing circles of the 19th century (Bratich and Brush 2011), they serve as a pretext for organization and discussion, empowering women by increasing their opportunities for social and political engagement within a feminized space.

Prior to the 20th century, textile arts had already become “a vehicle through which women have constructed discourses of their own, ones offering a broader range of positions from which to engage dominant culture” (Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 2009:27). Amid the abolitionist, suffrage, and temperance movements of the 19th century, textile arts, including embroidery, sewing, and knitting, were “used to evoke femininity – but femininity represented as a source of strength, not evidence of women’s weakness” (Parker 2010:197). These crafts feminized political spaces, allowing women to insert themselves into political discourse while maintaining a feminine persona and thereby legitimizing their causes. Abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth, despite speaking publically about the injustice of hegemonic ideals of femininity, often chose to be photographed in fine clothing with her knitting in hand (Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 2009). Such photographs allowed her to project an image of upper-class femininity, carefully constructing her public persona in a way that would be taken seriously by those in power.

The British Women’s Suffrage Movement used embroidered parasols to combat the stereotypes of anti-suffrage propaganda, as

the representation of the Suffragettes as lacking in femininity might have frightened other women away from identifying with the movement; and discredited the campaign as motivated not by politics but by the personal grievances of women who had failed to achieve the supposed fruits of femininity. [Parker 2010:198]

The use of quintessentially feminine parasols marked the movement as a “demand for equality, not androgyny” (2010:199), and as “as reformist not revolutionary” (2010:199). In addition, the movement’s embroidered “heroine banners” depicted Queen Victoria alongside Marie Curie and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, declaring her Queen and Mother and countering “anti-suffrage propaganda that God had ordained women to raise children, not to take part in political life” (2010:200). For these women, motherhood and political life were not incompatible but required the redefinition of the boundaries of both. The strategy of feminizing protest through needlework was later repeated in the 1970s and 1980s during the British Women’s Peace Movement (Parker 2010). Protesting nuclear proliferation, women occupying the Greenham Common Peace Camp used embroidered banners with suffrage and feminist motifs to adorn the fences surrounding the Greenham Common air base (Parker 2010), proclaiming their protest as by and for women.

In the United States, Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) leader Frances Willard used sewing to negotiate the public image of the movement, instructing “WCTU members to decorate speaking stages with flowers and national flags placed alongside needlework items they had made, such as state shields, banners, and mottos” (Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 2009:19). The presence of women’s handiwork softened the stage, bolstering “women’s ethos as speakers, since they were working in a space that was clearly feminized” (2009:19). No longer were these women out of place. Their household labor feminized the political realm and extended the “home,” thereby extending their sphere of influence. In addition, this political involvement was not limited to those women already inclined to stepping out into the public eye. This “activist needlework functioned as a means for temperance women less inclined to speak in public to work nonetheless for the cause” (2009:20), allowing women to participate in and contribute to political discourse according to their preference, comfort, and ability. Perhaps more

subversively, Willard is also credited with the design of a dress whose layers hid pant legs, which she instructed all of her followers to sew and wear (Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 2009). The so-called “Willard Dress” was designed to be more practical for everyday, highly mobile wear, while maintaining the standards of respectability which Willard believed would legitimize and bolster the cause. Because “be it woman’s or girl’s, the dress is a quintessentially gendered garment...an external surface transmitting a host of cultural messages, in a variety of styles that constitutes a veritable theatre of roles and codes” (Baert 1998:78), manipulating the form of the dress to enable greater freedom of movement also changed the meaning of the dress and its statements about femininity. In this way, sewing enabled women of the WCTU to negotiate dress codes and the limits of respectable womanhood, exercising a maximum of agency within structural confines.

Textile arts also became a way for women to serve their countries during wartime, asserting their value and efficacy on the home front. During the U.S. Civil War and World War I, knitting clothing became a way for women and girls left at home to contribute to the war effort (Strawn 2009). By knitting, women could access some sense of social cohesion, occupy organizational roles to help fund the war, and “take an active part in the extraordinary demands of war, in part for the soldiers, in part to meet her own needs” (2009:256). Amid women’s suffrage movements and the growing first wave of feminism, “knitting offered women another role in social and political activism” (2009:251). Suffragette Helen Hill, for example,

led the knitting unit at the headquarters for the 27th Assembly District of the Suffrage Party in New York City. Hill’s squadron of knitters – dubbed the “Knitting 27th” – turned out comfort hand-knits for the Navy League, specifically five garments for each sailor aboard the warship Missouri. Asked if the 3,560 hand-knits would be ready in time, Hill replied that the same women who gathered more than 500,000 signatures of women who want the vote “are not likely to stop at a little thing like knitting winter garments for 712 sailor boys.” [Strawn 2009:251]

By likening the work of knitting to the political work of the suffrage movement, Hill affirms women's ability to contribute significantly and tangibly to the war effort while emphasizing the greater work of the suffrage movement, and therefore women's efficacy and competence in the political realm.

At the dawn of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, "the organization of personal life with a strict division between the public and private, the domestic and professional, the emotional and intellectual, the masculine and the feminine, were analyzed as the means by which one group maintained power over another" (Parker 2010:205). This deconstruction meant that domestic handcrafts acquired an ambivalent role, particularly for those who crafted for their families rather than as art. According to Gillis and Hollows, "while some second wave feminists clearly sympathized with the position of the housewife who was trapped in the home performing unpaid work for her family, the home was frequently portrayed as a prison and a constraint" (Gillis and Hollows 2009:1). To some feminists, housewives were seen as powerless, isolated, and without their own identity, which problematized the practice of tasks associated with the home, including textile arts. However, given the historical use of these crafts as a means of protest and empowerment, this opinion was not shared by all second-wave feminists, and in the 1970s textile arts were used to show "that the personal was the political – that personal and domestic life is as much the product of the institutions and ideologies of our society as is public life" (Parker 2010:205). Embroidery was seen as "a medium with a heritage in women's hands, and thus as more appropriate than male-associated paint for making feminist statements" (2010:xiv). In feminist textile art exhibits, "the constraints of feminine 'purity and chastity' ...were challenged but not with the aim of achieving masculinity" (2010:xv), recognizing that, in the words of artist Kate Walker: "femininity and sweetness are part of women's strength...Quiet strength need not

be mistaken for useless vulnerability” (Parker 2010:xiv). These exhibitions used embroidery to problematize the home, express sexuality, and demand recognition for women’s art forms.

However, even in the absence of explicit political intent, skill in textile arts has historically, for some women, been a means to personal empowerment. For women who enjoyed and were skilled in sewing, “unpaid household labor resulted in tangible and symbolic gains in the form of social approbation and spared income” (Gordon 2004:78). For example, sewing has long served as a pretext for social bonding, friendship, and the development of community identity. In the 19th century, friendship quilts which “bear the names of one’s friends and family, names that were initially embroidered and later, handwritten” (Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 2009:19) became popular, frequently given as gifts when friends were to be separated for long periods of time. Such a quilt “would then become a utilitarian object that would still serve rhetorically as a mnemonically charged marker of friendship” (2009:19), and “their display would evoke both general ties of community and specific ties of friendship between women, both as makers and as recipients” (2009:19). Knitting groups, quilting bees (Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood 2009), and dressmakers clubs (Gordon 2004) provided a means of fundraising, a venue for social interaction and bonding, and a sense of community identity.

In addition, women have historically used sewing to maintain and manipulate their public image. Prior to the widespread availability of readymade clothing in the 1920s, sewing provided women a way to dress their families and themselves with clothing that belied their low incomes, alter patterns to push the boundaries of local dress codes, and improve their social standing through the admiration of others. For these women, though not for all, “the ability to dress well on a budget, reinterpret styles according to personal taste, or test the boundaries of modesty was a form of power” (2004:69-70). Women were able to save money while clothing themselves and

their families respectably, negotiating their identity by influencing how they and their families would be perceived by others. Unable to purchase clothing for their children for church or special occasions, mothers drew upon their own creativity and ingenuity to fashion outfits out of available materials (McLean 2009), and “without the clothing women made, families would have had fewer items of clothing, or clothing of lesser quality” (McLean 2009:75). In addition to providing for their children, mothers enjoyed the opportunity to project a higher-class image, gaining them the admiration of others. As Gordon explains:

Clothing a family took considerable time, effort, and skill. Unlike cooking and cleaning, its tangible results were long-lasting and traveled outside the home. Dress was vital to presenting an image of upward mobility or of preserving class status. A home seamstress therefore helped shape the identity of the people she clothed as she supported a household economy. [2004:69]

Unlike other household tasks, the products of sewing or other textile arts were highly visible to others outside of the home, and the affirmation women received from others

provided the evidence that enabled women to use discourses related to home sewing, including feminine thrift, creativity, and appearance, to position themselves positively as contributors to the family economy, providers of entertainment, and the means by which they and their families would be acceptably and attractively dressed. [McLean 2009:85]

For women who enjoyed sewing, the opportunity to express themselves and provide beautiful clothing for themselves and their families was a source of pride and power.

Through sewing, women were also able to exert control over their appearance and the image they presented to others, allowing them to manipulate designs to convey the values they held most dear. By 1920, the increasing accessibility of ready-made clothing and the increasing number of women working outside the home meant that fewer women needed to sew in order to clothe their families, but “sewing continued to resonate with understandings of feminine work, economic need, gender roles, cultural tradition, and artistic pleasure” (Gordon 2004:68).

Increasing access to education and work increased pressure on women to be desirable, feminine,

and loving, and sewing for family members became less a material necessity than a symbol of motherly love (Gordon 2004). In 1940s Alberta, amid fallout from the depression of the 1930s, falling grain prices, the decline of the coal mining industry, and rationing during World War II, sewing enabled women to dress “sensibly,” rather than “fashionably,” and thereby align themselves with Albertan values of resourcefulness and thrift (McLean 2009). This meant that “because they were able to manage all aspects of their appearances, home sewers knew they looked good, and were able to feel comfortable and maintain a positive self-image” (2009:82). In addition, for wage-earning women of the early 20th century, sewing was a way to conform to the dress codes required by the “pink-collar” workplace, eliminating the need to purchase expensive ready-made clothing and making their paid labor more viable while establishing themselves as respectable members of the workforce (Gordon 2004). For these women sewing did not challenge the potentially restrictive values held by the larger society, but it allowed them to better live up to these standards. In this way, sewing enabled women to maintain a positive self- and public image, fighting feelings of inadequacy and potentially contributing to a sense of well-being.

After a decline in the popularity of textile craftmaking in the later 20th century, due, in part, to feminist backlash following the Reagan administration’s emphasis on family values (Gillis and Hollows 2009), textile arts, particularly knitting, have had a recent resurgence among young women. In the early twenty-first century, as the number of publications on domestic arts soared (Myzelev 2009), “suddenly, domesticity became the buzzword of the new millennium” (Genz 2009:49). The meaning of the domestic sphere shifted, resignifying household tasks and domestic arts as a means of taking control. While for some women a return to the domestic arts, a phenomenon Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush (2007) refer to as “fabriculture,” is seen as a choice

to “go home,” an expression of nostalgia for an idealized past, for many, particularly knitters, it is framed as subversive and rebellious. Books such as Jennifer Stafford’s *DomiKNITrix* (2006) and Heather Dixon’s *Not Your Mama’s Knitting* (2006) reframe knitting as a project for young, fiercely independent, and unabashedly sexual women, resulting in a politicized practice (Groeneveld 2010). Perhaps most iconic, former BUST magazine editor Debbie Stoller’s *Stitch ‘n Bitch* (2003) has spawned a worldwide trend, a “global movement where women meet virtually, through the internet, and physically, often in local cafes and hotels, to socialize and share their craft” (Minahan and Cox 2007:6). Often meeting in public “third spaces” which blur the distinction between public and private activity, *Stitch ‘n Bitch* may represent “a new protest movement using craft as a subversive vehicle for comment on gender as well as on the increasing commodification of society and technology” (2007:11). Far from a tool of female subordination, sewing, knitting, and other textile arts have been reconceptualized as a symbol of reclaimed roots, independence, agency, and, often, a rejection of the more traditional associations of textile arts with maternalism, homemaking, or “grannies.” Even in the absence of overt radical overtones, Bratich and Brush (2011) argue that the very act of craftmaking is political. As Betsy Greer, founder of *craftivist.org*, writes, “it’s about making your own creativity a force to be reckoned with. The moment you start thinking about your own creative production as more than just a hobby or ‘women’s work,’ and instead as something that has cultural, historical and social value, craft becomes something stronger than a fad or trend” (Bratich and Brush 2011:248).

Grace and Gandolfo (2014:62) argue that:

[A] “craftswoman” identity is no longer a conforming performance of a culturally approved female identity, but an urgent self-expression, a claiming of something integral, joyful, and somewhat subversive. It is an identity performed through their embodied material practices, and their products linger in the environment, communicating some of the subtlety and complexity, but also the simplicity and groundedness of their identities.

The expression of creativity speaks to a desire to be recognized as unique individuals, but at the same time to remain recognizable as valid human beings.

For the women of whom Grace and Gandolfo write, crafting is an expression of skill and self rather than conformation to prescribed activities, engaged in for pleasure, challenge, and affirmation as much as the production of useful products or the performance of expected, gendered behaviors.

1.2.6 Crafting Community Health

Today, women crafters' motivations for participating in craft vary. Collier (2011), for example, finds that the physical pleasure of textile making is a central motivation for many women, who describe their enjoyment of the beauty and feel of the fabric and the rhythm and repetition that craftmaking entails. The rhythm of craftmaking can induce the achievement of "flow," which Collier describes as "a mental state in which a person is fully engaged in an activity, has mastery yet feels challenged by the activity, becomes completely absorbed, feels an energized focus, and finds the activity to be intrinsically rewarding" (2011:110-111). Flow offers distraction from the stress of daily life, reduces anxiety, and aids in adaptation after stressful life events (Johnson and Wilson 2005; Reynolds 2008), potentially helping women to cope with larger challenges. In addition, for mothers, crafting can represent "an opportunity to get away from everybody else, to do something just for me" (Grace, Gandolfo, and Candy 2009:247), providing a break from the endless work of mothering and allowing mothers to pursue projects as individuals. Respite, relaxation, and pleasure are therefore important elements of the appeal of craftmaking, and may contribute to women's emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

In addition, however, Foss (1996) theorizes sewing as a self-making ritual. Women declare their intent to sew, which alerts others of their decision proceed with the project and acts as "a means for the woman's involvement in a potentially subversive ritual to be interpreted as non-

threatening and insignificant” (1996:63). They separate themselves from the outside world in fabric stores and sewing rooms which act as a “liminal space,” which is altered for their purposes (furniture moved out of the way, a sewing machine set up), marked off by symbols (such as pins or cloth spread on the floor for cutting), and secluded from outsiders by means of a unique terminology (basting, interfacing, tacking). It is at this point that the woman is free to perform “magic” (Foss 1996), constructing her project and exercising a level of choice and agency not often available to her outside of the sewing room. When the project is completed, the ritual space is disassembled (items put away, scraps swept off the floor), but even after returning to the outside world her garment serves as a symbol “of her alternative world and her different way of being in it” (Foss 1996:70). In this way, sewing challenges hegemonic discourses by providing women with another way to act. Foss refers to this process as “re-sourcement,” or the act of “creating and living in a world that constitutes an alternative to patriarchy” by “living as though that desired reality already exists” (1996:58). Sewing constructs a space within structural bindings, in which women are freer to act: in the words of Starhawk, the sewing room becomes “a hole torn in the fabric of domination” (Foss 1996:74).

Learning new skills depends on changing practice and roles, and therefore learning to sew may be understood as learning to act, altering women’s performances and thereby their subjectivities. According to Grace and Gandolfo, identity construction is “not just...an internal project of the self, not just...socially constructed, but also constructed in embodied interaction with the material world” (2014:61). Such “embodied interaction,” from arts and crafts to working with machinery to playing in nature, is a medium for self-expression and, through this, self-making. As Prentice (2012) describes, for textile workers in Trinidad, the development of new skills is described as a process of personal development. Skill is conceived of “as a

cumulative project located in her own body” (2012:409) in which “even a repetitive activity like stitching pockets or buttonholes becomes an emblem of a well-practiced competence” (2012:409). The development of skill becomes the development of one’s identity as “competent” or “expert,” identifications that may extend beyond the craft itself into other areas of the crafter’s life. Rather than a purely economic pursuit,

Trinidadian garment workers often describe learning to sew as a practice of agency, using a language of self-reliance, freedom, and pleasure: skills mean being able to “do something for yourself” as a “way of independence,” to “have ideas where you could help yourself,” which allows the seamstress to “make the move, do things” and “have real money.” [2012:410]

In this case, learning to sew symbolizes not only an increase in economic opportunities, but also the opportunity for increased self-sufficiency, self-confidence, and agency even within the larger society.

Opportunities for self-making are particularly important for those who lack external sources of validation, such as fulfilling paid work, and for women whose social roles have changed due to age, disability, or illness. As Riley argues, textiles “are a projection of the self, a part of identity” (2008:64), reflecting the wearer’s culture, social status, and personal preferences. When an individual produces the garment themselves, it also showcases their own creativity and skill. This means that over time the tangible results of art-making create a record of the artist’s personal development, serving as evidence of their growth and ingenuity and contributing to a sense of self-esteem (Reynolds 2002). In a study of thirty women suffering from long-term illnesses, for example, Reynolds (2002) finds that artwork serves as a symbolic marker of their suffering, contributes to a sense of mastery, and provides a sense of generativity. As one participant remarks, “I had the feeling that if I could somehow make external the pain and struggle of my illness I would recover – nice idea – it didn’t quite work but it was important to try” (2002:101). For these women, the art they create serves as an extension of themselves,

allowing them to externalize their illness and therefore helping them to communicate, explore and manage their experiences. The challenge of visual art-making also contributes to a sense of mastery over the illness by providing “something to be in control of” (2002:103). Furthermore, craftmaking can create a sense of temporal “transcendence” and generativity, connecting women to their forebears through the practice of tradition and to their descendants through the opportunity to leave behind a lasting and tangible legacy. According to Reynolds (2002) this may create a sense of historical and global connectedness and of personal “immortality.”

The opportunity to “stitch a self” through sewing is supportive of women’s well-being. The challenge of craftmaking boosts self-esteem and provides feelings of satisfaction, while the tangible results of craftmaking and their use as gifts for others provide a sense of productivity and purpose. (Burt and Atkinson 2012; Grace, Gandolfo, and Candy 2009). Sewing also creates opportunities to establish social networks from which emotional and material support can be gleaned, creating a sense of belonging. Because they are based upon the pursuit of a common interest, crafting groups are particularly well suited to facilitate the development of friendships and social support systems (Burt and Atkinson 2012), which Maidment and Macfarlane (2009) argue can nurture a more positive sense of self. Through the praise received when a product is finished, craft groups serve as a source of affirmation, creating a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem (Burt and Atkinson 2011; Reynolds 2008). Furthermore, sharing knowledge with another person not only expands the skill set of the learner, but also reinforces the skill of the teacher and gives them a sense of competence, self-efficacy, and accomplishment (Maidment and Macfarlane 2009; 2011a). More tangibly, the establishment of social networks within crafting groups may give women access to resources, including crafting materials, recipes, health information, and carpooling (Maidment and Macfarlane 2011a). Finally, the sense of connection

and purpose women find in crafting groups may extend outside of the group through the production and giving of handmade gifts.

According to Vickers and Deckert “as people become socialized to participate in new groups...shifts in subjectivity occur as they enact subject positions that allow them to construct identities of competence in these new groups” (2013:117). These new competent identities are not restricted to the crafting group, but instead “such skillful, purposeful, and creative *doing*, which contributes to *becoming* a textile-maker through mastering skills and processes, is intimately connected with *being* – a sense of who we are” (Riley 2008:64). When such “doing” takes place in the context of a group of others, a shared identity results, creating a sense of belonging, and, therefore, a sense of place and purpose. Creating a sense of purpose is particularly important for those whose social roles have shifted, or who are marginalized by virtue of their gender, age, ethnicity, or other factors. For instance, for women with grown grandchildren, craft may become a source of “generativity,” or the ability to leave a legacy for future generations (Adams-Price 2008), when the generative work of paid labor and childrearing ends. For these women, producing and giving away craft may be considered a means of maintaining equal relationships “based on mutual interests and care-giving rather than age or dependency” (Reynolds 2008:141), helping to maintain a sense of competence, independence, and self-worth. Furthermore, for mental health patients marginalized by stigma and sometimes physically confined to the marginal space of the hospital, Parr notes that participation in the arts provides a “feeling of connectivity, the possibility of being included in cultural and social life on equal and non-marginal terms, and...potential access to new categorizations as ‘normal’ and ‘participative’ citizens” (2006:162). According to Rowlands, “empowerment is concerned with the processes by which people become aware of their own interests and how those relate to the

interests of others, in order both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and actually to influence such decisions” (1997:14). This process, recognizing the way in which hegemonic ideologies are internalized and incorporated into the body, “must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions” (1997:14). By enabling women to see themselves as more capable, creating a place for them within the social environment, and connecting them with others with whom to learn and cooperate, learning to sew can be seen as a process of empowerment.

1.3 Significance and Thesis Outline

This thesis contributes to a holistic understanding of marginalized mothers’ well-being by concentrating on the impact of a sense of fulfillment, adequacy, and productivity on women’s perceptions of quality of life rather than on biomedical markers of health. By theorizing a link among skill development, empowerment, and well-being, this research demonstrates the importance of perceived role fulfillment on women’s well-being, highlighting both the challenges that women face and the potential of informal skill development to reduce these barriers and contribute to a sense of adequacy and well-being. This research also demonstrates the role that community-level skill development programming can play in fostering a sense of well-being among marginalized members in their communities. It may therefore inform the development of projects similar to the Sewing Circle, which may serve a means to community empowerment. These programs, grassroots level, accessible, and relatively inexpensive, may enable women to improve their own circumstances and therefore their well-being.

In Chapter Two I discuss the ethnographic methodology I employ and the ethnographic context in which I carried out my research. Chapter Three examines the challenges that mothers face in the core neighborhoods of Saskatoon, including poverty, lone parenthood, and the unique challenges of grandmotherhood. In addition, I also examine participants’ concepts of well-being,

particularly its holistic nature and the necessity of safe spaces, a positive social environment, and the maintenance of an individual identity apart from their role as mothers. In Chapter Four, I discuss the effect of sewing on women's self-concepts, including a sense of self-sufficiency, productivity, and the ability to overcome personal limitations. I also demonstrate the role of the products of sewing in participants' lives, including serving as an opportunity to express and negotiate various identities and to enhance social networks through gift-giving. Chapter Five presents the social network created by the Sewing Circle. The safe space, matricentricity, and common ground of the Sewing Circle provide an opportunity for mothers to form a community based on social support and mutual aid. I conclude by demonstrating the way in which sewing, its products, and the matricentric social network of the Sewing Circle foster women's empowerment by altering their performance of their mother identities. I connect participants' conceptualizations of well-being with the results of the Sewing Circle to demonstrate the sites at which the Sewing Circle may positively impact women's well-being. Finally, I discuss the implications of this research and suggest paths for future inquiry.

CHAPTER 2 ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Ethnographic Context

2.1.1 Saskatoon's Core Neighborhoods

The Saskatoon Mothers' Centre sits in the heart of Saskatoon's core neighborhoods, a group of six neighborhoods located on Saskatoon's west side (Neudorf et al. 2008:6). These neighborhoods tend to be lower-income and bear a disproportionate share of Saskatoon's ill health. According to the 2008 Saskatoon Health Region (SHR) Health Status Report, in 2006 47 percent of core neighborhood residents lived below Statistics Canada's Low-Income Cut Off, much higher than the 17.7 percent reported for Saskatoon as a whole (Neudorf et al. 2009:81). These neighborhoods display higher rates of mental illness, chronic illness, and infectious disease (2009:80), and suffer from greater unemployment and lower education rates than the city average (2009:86). The core neighborhoods also suffer from higher rates of teenage pregnancy (2009:22), single parenthood (2009:83), and low birthweight (2009:22) than the rest of Saskatoon and an infant mortality rate twice the city average (2009:24), suggesting that these health disparities are felt especially strongly by women and their children.

While open to all women, the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre is primarily targeted at Aboriginal and newcomer mothers, two major disadvantaged groups in Saskatoon. According to Neudorf and colleagues (2014), newcomers, including immigrants and refugees, make up 11.9 percent of the population of Saskatoon, and this number is increasing. From 2006 to 2011 the number of newcomers settling in the Saskatoon Health Region nearly tripled (Saskatoon Health Region 2014), necessitating attention to the challenges that newcomers in Saskatoon face. These issues are complex, diverse, and dynamic. In a phenomenon labeled the "healthy immigrant effect" (Fuller-Thompson, Noack, and George 2011; Oxman-Martinez, Abdool, and Loiselle-Léonard

2000), newcomers tend to be healthier than their Canadian counterparts upon arrival to Canada, due largely to Canadian immigrant screening processes and the fact that healthier individuals are more likely to emigrate. Over time, however, this advantage diminishes, and newcomers' health outcomes begin to match or fall below those of the general Canadian population. In addition, immigrants tend to be more highly educated and skilled than Canadians, on average, and, over time, are more likely to become homeowners (Hiebert 2010). However, newcomers are a diverse group, and this statement does not represent the experiences of all. Their credentials may not be recognized by Canadian employers, and "the proportion of newcomers classified as living below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cutoff (LICO) has risen in each census taken since 1981" (Hiebert 2010:8). Newcomer women in particular are susceptible to isolation, loss of social support systems, racism, domestic violence, and poor working conditions or unemployment, leading to stress, depression, and lowered self-esteem (Oxman-Martinez, Abdool, and Louiselle-Léonard 2000). They suffer from poorer outcomes following childbirth (Gagnon et al. 2013), display higher rates of postpartum depression (Gagnon et al. 2013), and are more often lone parents (Hiebert 2010). Furthermore, newcomers in Canada tend to be "overrepresented in the most multiply-deprived neighborhoods," (Pampalon, Hamel, and Gamache 2010:470), such as those of inner-city Saskatoon. This means that in addition to the struggles of immigration, newcomers may also face the challenges presented by Saskatoon's core neighborhoods, a burden shared by the city's Aboriginal residents.

Aboriginal people make up only 9.3 percent of SHR's population but more than 33 percent of core neighborhood residents (Neudorf et al. 2009:6), meaning that the problems faced by the core neighborhoods apply disproportionately to Aboriginal people. Saskatoon exists on Treaty

Six land¹, a fact which obscures the painful legacy of colonialism in Saskatoon and in Canada as a whole, where systematic attempts to assimilate Aboriginal peoples, seize their land and resources, and erase their cultures have led to lasting impacts on the health and social well-being of Aboriginal communities and peoples (Waldram, Herring, and Young 2006). In particular, the creation of residential schools in the 1880s which separated children from their families and cultures, subjected them to abuse, and deprived them of the opportunity to learn their heritage cultures and languages has had a significant impact on Aboriginal peoples today (Waldram, Herring, and Young 2006). According to Waldram, Herring, and Young, “although only a minority of children ever experienced these schools, and although resistance to their operation was extensive, many children in effect became ‘deculturized,’ losing both their ability to be culturally ‘Indian,’ and the ability to provide good parental role models to their own children as they reached adulthood” (2006:15). By the 1930s there were 80 residential schools in operation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2012:6), and the long process of closing the schools did not begin until 1949 (2012:19). Even after this point, the schools were used as child welfare institutions, with the dramatic “Sixties scoop” of the 1960s and 1970s² vastly increasing

¹ Treaty Six is one of seven numbered treaties, covering the majority of western and central Canada, which were signed between Canada and First Nations groups in the 1870s (Miller 2009). In response to economic concerns and recognizing the impending encroachment of eastern settlers, Treaty Six was negotiated by Plains Cree chiefs in 1876 (Miller 2009) and includes the majority of central Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Like the other numbered treaties, in exchange for prairie land Treaty Six promised initial payments and annuities, continued hunting and gathering rights, ammunition and farming implements, and reserves of land. In addition to these conditions, Treaty Six also contains clauses dealing with famine and healthcare and promising assistance in times of hardship. In the years since the signing of this treaty, however, the interpretation and delivery of these promises have been highly contested, forming the center of ongoing dispute and a number of legal battles (Miller 2009).

² The “Sixties Scoop,” a term first used by Patrick Johnston (1983), refers to a dramatic increase in the number of Aboriginal children apprehended by child welfare authorities that took place across Canada over the 1960s and 1970s. This resulted in a significant overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in foster care, and in Saskatchewan, by the 1970s over 60 percent of children

the number of children removed from their homes (2012:20). The last residential schools, including two in Saskatchewan, did not close until the mid-1990s (2012:20). In the early 21st century, with a very young and quickly growing Aboriginal population, the challenges created by residential schools and the Sixties Scoop have become particularly apparent. Many young Aboriginal women raising their children today have parents or grandparents affected by the legacy of residential schools and the child welfare system, disrupting family structures and, in the words of the Mothers' Centre coordinator, "the role of a parent."

2.1.2 The Saskatoon Mothers' Centre

The Saskatoon Mothers' Centre is located in Station 20 West, a community centre that straddles the border between two of Saskatoon's core neighborhoods. Station 20 West houses a constellation of organizations, including a parenting support organization, an employment training and housing support organization, and a community grocery store and café. The building also houses the University of Saskatchewan's Community Engagement offices, and offers meeting space for a variety of community events, including job fairs, fitness classes, and community meetings and information sessions.

The Mothers' Centre model of the Mothers' International Network for Empowerment (MINE) was developed in Germany in 2000 and has since expanded to over one thousand centres in twenty countries (Jaeckel 2011:311). Recognizing the decline of extended families and community cohesion that for so long provided support for mothers, Mothers' Centres attempt to "recreate family and neighborhood structures where they have been weakened by modernization" (2011:311) by supporting community development based on a "culture of care"

in care were of Aboriginal background (Johnston 1983). The vast majority placed with non-Aboriginal families (Johnston 1983), many of these children essentially lost their language, spirituality, and culture, resulting in profound disruptions to families and communities.

(2011:311) in which all participants contribute to the well-being of the group. In this environment, “the task is to create the conditions to balance today’s individualistic lifestyle against social responsibility and socially reliable networks” (2011:317), valuing a variety of ways of relating to others outside of the socially recognized nuclear family. To this end, Mothers’ Centres attempt to “reinvent family and kinship under contemporary conditions by creating extended family structures in the context of neighborhood and community” (2011:318), buffering the isolating effects of a highly individualistic society. Furthermore, by following a “resource” orientation rather than a “deficit” orientation, Mothers’ Centres attempt to build upon individual women’s strengths and demonstrate how these strengths can contribute to the Centre and to the community. In this environment, “women are supported to join forces to improve the lives of their families and communities, connect with families from different social and cultural backgrounds, gain acknowledgement for their everyday life expertise, fight poverty and social exclusion, and participate in local governance” (Jaeckel 2011:315). By challenging hyperindividualism, valuing both women and their work as mothers, and providing validation for alternative ways of mothering, Mothers’ Centres have the potential to nurture alternative subjectivities, the “motherselfhoods” promoted by Chandler (1998).

According to O’Reilly, Mothers’ Centres operate on what she dubs a “matricentric pedagogy,” a strategy toward education and empowerment “that is emphatically mother-centred in its standpoint (recognizes and responds to the specific needs of women as mothers), and matrifocal in its perspective (values and validates the intellectual, self-reflexive, and philosophical thinking and practice of motherwork)” (2013:191). The mandate to provide a sense of security, community, and validation to women is central to the empowerment work of Mothers’ Centres. Respect, consideration of others’ feelings and thoughts, and the promise of

non-judgment, which O'Reilly (2013) calls security, help to create a space in which discussion and debate feel safe. In such an environment, there is the potential to develop critical consciousness, acknowledging and validating women's voices and linking their experiences to the larger power structures that shape and limit their actions (O'Reilly 2013). Furthermore, with the confidence and understanding that "here what is right for you may not be right for me" (O'Reilly 2013:198), women gain a sense of self-efficacy, confident that they can know what is best for their families. Such validation of women's knowledge and wisdom "empowers mothers to act and speak from this knowledge; it instills them with, in the words of one mother, 'the audacity to do so'" (2013:204). A sense of community deepens this confidence further by providing the support of others, encouraging mothers to trust in themselves and their decisions. Because "through community participation, people develop new beliefs in their ability to influence their personal and social spheres" (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988:380), Mothers' Centres support the development of women's confidence, agency, and authority, empowering them to become more effective not only within their families but within their larger communities.

The Saskatoon Mothers' Centre is comprised of a large room (see Figure 1), in which visitors are greeted by the ever-present scent of freshly brewed coffee and a homelike environment. In the Mothers' Centre, celebrations of women and of their children intermingle, the walls adorned with both children's and women's artwork (often featuring maternal themes) and the windowsills decked with both toys and trophies from the women's past achievements in the Saskatoon Dragonboat Races. Potted plants liven the room. In one corner, a kitchenette, to which all visitors have access, promises a snack or a meal. Adjacent to the kitchen is a living-room style seating area with three large couches and two armchairs arranged around a coffee table, in which

mothers can talk over coffee or nurse their babies comfortably while older children play. The table is marked by dried paint and glue, remnants of art projects long past, and a smaller side table bears both magazines and children's books. Across the room, there is a small office composed of a desk, a filing cabinet, a bulletin board, and a calendar, for the use of the hosts and coordinators. Next to this, another desk holds two back-to-back desktop computers which, along with a telephone, are available for all visitors to use. The final corner of the room overflows with children's toys, games, and books. An upright piano lines the back wall, while the wall closest to the entrance is taken up by a shelf of adult books, a bulletin board with information and community announcements, and a cabinet for sewing supplies. On top of this cabinet are set items for donation, mostly children's clothing but also occasionally adult clothing and household items. Finally, the centre of the room is dominated by a long folding table, covered with a purple tablecloth, which tends to form the center of the action and is used for eating, crafting, and playing board games or putting together puzzles.



Figure 1: The Saskatoon Mothers' Centre.

The Mothers' Centre offers four three-hour drop-in sessions per week, run by paid hosts who are also mothers in the community. During these hours, women can access food, donated clothing or books, a telephone or computer, and information. However, the central appeal of the Mothers' Centre's drop-in hours is the opportunity to sit and talk with other mothers in a child-friendly environment. While their children play, mothers discuss everything from feelings to health information to advice on finding housing, indicating that the opportunity to talk with and learn from other women is a major resource. In addition to the drop-in centre, the Mothers' Centre offers a Sewing Circle, dinners and dances for special occasions, a dragonboat team every summer, and, more recently, a knitting program, and a literacy program for children.

The Sewing Circle is held once a week on Thursday evenings. The first half-hour is devoted to a family-style meal, cooked during that day's drop-in hours by the host of the day and often visitors eager to help. Participants and visitors are invited to help themselves and their children to food, and the group sits together to eat and talk either at the long table or in the living-room style space. After dinner, the children are left in the Mothers' Centre with a childminder while their mothers move down the hall into one of Station 20 West's boardrooms to sew. These rooms are spacious, clean, and new, with comfortable swivel office chairs and an abundance of table and floor space for sewing, laying out projects, and cutting fabric. During the first few weeks, the sewing portion of the program consisted of a structured lesson led by the sewing coordinator, teaching new skills or running through the steps of a new project. As women's skill levels increased, however, their interests diverged, and later in the program they used the Sewing Circle time to work on a variety of individual products with the instructor nearby to help when needed.

Attendance at the Sewing Circle varies somewhat from one week to the next. During my research period, however, there emerged a core group of thirteen diverse women, who make up

the primary participants represented in my interviews and focus groups. Each participant was informed of the purpose, benefits, and risks of the project and provided their written and informed consent, and I assigned each a pseudonym, which I use throughout this thesis. This group consists of six Aboriginal women, three European-Canadian women, and four women who are non-European newcomers to Canada. These women range in age from twenty-seven to their early sixties, with education levels ranging from less than high school to a university degree. All are mothers and/or grandmothers, and most have infant to teenaged children or grandchildren living at home. Although all of the women had some experience crafting, all were beginner sewers and many had never before used a sewing machine. Their motivations for attending the Sewing Circle varied, and included making friends, having a hobby, learning to make gifts, overcoming fears and personal boundaries, and having time to themselves while their children play.

2.2 Methodology

This project developed out of an evaluation of the Mothers' Centre Sewing Circle and drop-in program conducted by my supervisor, Dr. Pamela Downe, in the spring of 2014. This evaluation was conducted at the request of the Saskatoon Mother's Centre, as part of the requirements of the program's funding grant (Downe 2014), and emphasized the contribution of these programs to participants' emotional, social, and financial well-being. I contributed to the data collection process for this evaluation, conducting individual interviews with participants and assisting with the administration of focus groups. Although I draw upon these data, this thesis forms a separate project and is not intended as an evaluation of the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre or its Sewing Circle. This section describes the methods I employed in my data collection and analysis in the conduct of this project.

2.2.1 Narrative Ethnography

Acknowledging the often unbalanced relationship between researchers and those they research, and particularly that “the historical imbalance of power, deep-seated mistrust, racism, and lack of control between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada has also permeated the research process” (Castleden, Garvin, and Huu-ay-aht First Nation 2008:1394), I analyzed my data under the understanding that “because we are cultured beings, objectivity is impossible,” and “claims of objectivity gird a set of research approaches and policies that support the status quo” (Gailey 1998:206). My own background, as a European-Canadian, childless woman, younger than the rest of the participants and currently seeking a graduate degree, created marked difference between me and many of my participants, influencing how I was perceived by this group of women. My ethnicity, education, class position, and role as researcher had the potential to impact both my ability to be welcomed by and participate in the group, and the data I collected. However, my age and lack of children may have mitigated this issue to some extent. I became something of the “little sister” of the group, often left in charge of the children. When one member of the group brought her newborn son to the Sewing Circle and passed him around for the other mothers to see and hold, upon my turn the women giggled at my uncertainty but soon proclaimed me a “natural.” However, because these power dynamics cannot be entirely mitigated, I chose to conduct this project using the methods of narrative ethnography, a reflexive methodology which “combines the approaches of writing a standard monograph about the people being studied (the Other) with an ethnographic memoir centering on the anthropologist (the Self)” (Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland 1998:264). Narrative ethnography acknowledges the interpersonal construction of knowledge and inherent barriers to objectivity, and attempts to “struggle self-consciously to avoid portraying abstract, ahistorical ‘others’” (Clifford 1988:23).

2.2.2 Participant Observation

According to Didier Fassin, “the power and charm of ethnography resides in the participant observation of a given society or group or even individuals, in their local environment” (2013:120). Participant observation involves not only the observation of a group, but also the ethnographer’s active engagement in the group’s routines and rituals in an attempt to learn both the tacit and explicit aspects of the community under study (Dewalt, Dewalt, and Wayland 1998). From January to May 2014 I attended one full twelve-week session of the Sewing Circle, including participating in the planning of a year-end celebration of the Sewing Circle. Originally, I intended to act as a volunteer in the Sewing Circle, using my prior knowledge of the craft to assist the instructor. As I conversed with the participants, however, I found that they were interested in my own sewing and projects, and wanted me to sew. Realizing that “access to un verbalized bodily knowledge can only be gained through bodily participation” (Dilley 1999:35), I eased into a more hands-on role, learning three projects alongside the other women. This role allowed me to engage with the mothers more fully, and on more level ground. Rather than attempting to offer the little knowledge I had, I was able to choose and discuss fabrics, share tools, and ask my classmates for help when I had trouble or made mistakes, small ineptitudes which I believe were crucial to building relationships with my participants. In addition to the Sewing Circle sessions, from April to July 2014 I also attended the Mothers’ Centre drop-in hours three to four days per week, including filling in as a host for several sessions, and participated as a member of the Mothers’ Centre’s dragonboat team. This allowed me to solidify my relationship with the Mothers’ Centre, observe a variety of its functions, and experience the sense of friendship, community, and responsibility the Mothers’ Centre could offer.

After each fieldwork session I recorded descriptive fieldnotes, which Clifford describes as “the making of a more or less coherent representation of an observed cultural reality” (1988:51)

through “the careful record of observation, conversation, and informal interview carried out on a day to day basis by the researcher” (Dewalt, Dewalt and Wayland 1998:271). I took note of the participants present, the products they made, and the discussions I had with them, along with a timeline of the events of each session and any unusual occurrences, such as the occasional conflict.

2.2.3 Individual Interviews

I also conducted eleven semi-structured, person-centred interviews, with eight participants, the Sewing Circle coordinator, the regular childminder, and a volunteer who led craft projects for the children most Sewing Circle nights. I approached each of these participants personally to invite them for an interview, scheduled the interviews at the participant’s convenience, and held the interviews in the Mothers’ Centre, Station 20 West’s café, and at a café away from the field site. All but one of these participants had participated in at least one focus group prior to being interviewed, which may have both encouraged and influenced their reflection on the interview questions.

Because the person and his or her context are not entirely separate but mutually affect and construct one another, the goal of person-centred interviewing is to explore the relationship and interactions between private and public realms of experience by disrupting the natural settings and patterns of social interaction (Levy and Hollan 1998). Person-centred interviews are therefore particularly well-suited to the investigation of the relationship between structural forces and human experience and agency, the basis of subjectivity. In these interviews, recognizing that “ethnographers enter the stream of social experience at a particular time and place, so that their description will be both a cross-sectional slice through the complexity of ongoing priorities and a part of the temporal flow of changing structures of relevance” (Kleinman 1995:98), I addressed women’s reasons for attending the Sewing Circle, the benefits they perceived, their favorite

projects, and their experiences learning to sew. I also investigated their conceptions of well-being, the actions they believed supported and sustained their well-being, and what they believed was still needed to support the well-being of themselves and other women in Saskatoon (see Appendix A). Although the questions asked by the interviewer necessarily make assumptions and set the agenda for the interview (Koven 2014), shaping and limiting participants' responses, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed me to pursue other topics as they arose. All but two of these interviews were digitally recorded. After each interview, I took notes on the interviews, and later transcribed each recording for analysis.

2.2.4 Focus Groups

I also conducted three focus groups, two of which I conducted in conjunction with my supervisor and one I led on my own (see Appendix B). According to Kratz (2010), a focus group is a discussion about a particular topic of interest, among a group of participants who have something in common that relate to the topic and led by a trained moderator. Focus groups have several advantages over individual interviews which, ideally, should make them particularly suited to research with marginalized groups. Within focus groups, "the researcher's power and influence is reduced, because she has much less power and influence over a group than over an individual" (Wilkinson 1998:114), ideally resulting in a "communicative democracy" (Kratz 2010:811) in which "priority is given to the respondents' hierarchy of importance, *their* language and concepts, *their* frameworks for understanding the world" (Wilkinson 1998:117). Furthermore, the opportunity to discuss emotions, beliefs and experiences with others "allows them to break silence, understand that their experiences are shared by others, and validate their feelings and opinions" (Hollander 2004:608-609), an experience which may become part of a larger process of consciousness raising (Wilkinson 1998).

However, in place of this utopian and depoliticized ideal, “ethnographic uses of focus groups would, instead, assume that differences of power, expertise, and social relations are intrinsic to knowledge production and seek to understand how focus group interactions are implicated and how they relate to other settings and relations” (Kratz 2010:811). The social nature of focus groups can also make them challenging to interpret, rendering them ill-suited for gathering individual-level data. Unlike an individual interview, a focus group is intended to more closely mimic natural interactions, which, “sensitively analyzed...can offer insights into the relational aspects of self, the processes by which meanings and knowledges are constructed through interactions with others, and the ways in which social inequities are produced and perpetuated through talk” (Wilkinson 1998:123). Recognizing that answers will be constructed within the social context of the focus group creates an opportunity to examine these interactions as social events, overlain by cultural scripts, structural hierarchies, and personal relationships.

Each of my focus groups consisted of between eight and twelve Sewing Circle participants, recruited by word of mouth. Each group had a slightly different makeup depending on the availability of participants, but in total the focus group series included all of my interview participants as well as several other women whom I did not interview. In an effort to make these focus groups as accessible as possible for participants, ensure a mother-friendly research process, and foster natural conversation, I decided to conduct them on site at the Saskatoon Mothers’ Centre, immediately prior to the start of the Sewing Circle. This approach resulted in both benefits and drawbacks to the research process. The convenient timing of the focus groups and the opportunity to conduct them in a child friendly space may have increased women’s ability to participate by eliminating the need for them to find childcare or extra transportation, and

therefore each focus group was attended by a full table of participants with no need to reschedule.

However, conducting the focus groups in the sometimes chaotic environment of the Mothers' Centre also posed some methodological difficulties. The noisy environment made the use of a voice recorder virtually impossible and hindered conversation, while the presence and needs of the women's children created frequent distractions. Women frequently left the table to get food or tend to a child. Furthermore, I did not achieve the level of conversation desired, which may have been due to the social dynamics of the group. First, the women in the group were all acquaintances, and some were friends or family with others in the group. These dynamics were further complicated by the presence of their children and of the Mothers' Centre coordinators and other stakeholders. As Hollander warns, "although a focus group discussion will end, a participant's relationships with others in the group may be more enduring, and comments made during the discussion may have consequences for the participant within those relationships – and indeed, within other relationships in the associational context" (2004:615). These relationships may have hindered conversation, contributing to the "question and answer" format I observed. Such patterns "simultaneously advertised and maintained project role hierarchies related to such factors as education, experience with the project...and relative involvement and responsibility for local project planning and decisions" (Kratz 2010:814). In fact, one participant specifically asked me for an individual interview, to avoid discussing difficult topics in the group setting, while another waited until after the focus group to stress to my supervisor the importance of a hot meal.

The group was also very socioeconomically diverse. According to Hollander, (2004) those with higher status in the local hierarchy tend to talk more in a group, and the topics they raise are

more likely to be carried on by others in the group. In my focus groups, the most highly educated and least ethnically marginalized women were those who spoke up the most, a fact which may have been due to personality differences but likely also highlighted power differentials. Finally, gender dynamics do not disappear within a sexually homogenous group. Because motherhood is a major and often challenged part of women's identities, they may have been reluctant to reveal their experiences out of fear of being judged, particularly in such an economically and ethnically diverse group. While these dynamics may not have hindered friendships within the Sewing Circle, in which, as one participant notes, "everyone is at the same level," within a more formal discussion environment these issues may have come into play. Overall, as Hollander stresses, "what focus groups tell us is how people communicate with others" (2004:628), and focus groups should be considered a research site, "a place where we can observe social interaction" (2004:631), rather than a method for the collection of individual-level data. Although discussion was not forthcoming, my focus groups served as a site for the observation of interactions, power dynamics, and the relationships among members of the groups.

2.2.5 Analysis

I analyzed my interview transcripts, focus group notes, and fieldnotes according to the tenets of grounded theory, an "iterative process by which the analyst becomes more and more 'grounded' in the data and develops increasingly richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really works" (Bernard and Ryan 1998:608). In this process, the researcher identifies potential themes within the text, compiles and compares the categories, and builds potential theoretical models, while "constantly checking the models against the data" (1998:608) in order to ensure that these models are truly "grounded" in evidence. After reading through my fieldnotes, focus group notes, and interview transcripts several times, I began to read through each document while underlining and noting possible themes. I then compared the

transcripts for overlapping trends and began to construct theoretical models by theorizing the connections between themes and checking these connections using other data. A number of overarching and interacting themes emerged, including the challenges that women in Saskatoon's core neighborhoods face, the conditions they consider vital to their well-being, and the benefits they perceive from the Sewing Circle, including from learning to sew and from the social network that emerges from the program.

2.2.6 Timeline

After initial contact with the Mothers' Centre in October 2013 in which my project and the Sewing Circle evaluation were discussed, planned, and approved, I applied for and received ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board. I conducted my research, including participant observation, individual interviews, focus groups, and all transcription, from January to July 2014. After completing all data collection, I began to compile and analyze the data, a process which I completed in November 2014. This thesis was written and edited over a six-month period from December 2014 to May 2015.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHALLENGES AND WELL-BEING OF MOTHERS IN SASKATOON

Well-being depends upon one's ability to carry out the tasks required of them. Part of this effort is composed of what Weisner refers to as the sustainability of daily life, which involves "juggling ongoing demands in the service of meeting long-term goals" (2009:230) in the face of a variety of challenges and barriers. According to Weisner, "parents everywhere have a common project: to construct a social ecology that balances what they want for themselves and their family, with what is possible given their circumstances" (2009:228). Mothers' well-being depends on their ability to maintain this social ecology, an often challenging task.

Women in Saskatoon's core neighborhoods carry a disproportionate share of the city's poverty burden and represent an underserved sector of the city. Although services for mothers abound in the city, these tend to focus on teenage mothers or new mothers of children under the age of five, or on parents deemed to be "high risk." While these initiatives address the challenges of the "motherhood immersion" (Francis-Connolly 2000) of raising preschoolers, they do little for women who fall outside of these categories, ignoring the fact that motherhood "never ends" (Francis-Connolly 1998). Although the care that children need may become less intensive as they grow older, the tasks of motherhood only change and may indeed be replaced with those that are less physically taxing, but more emotionally draining. As Francis-Connolly writes, "whether it is right or wrong, mothers are held accountable for their children's growth and success....This feeling of responsibility and accountability is part of the lifetime occupation of mothering" (1998:153). Throughout the lives of their children, mothers' roles continue to change, continually providing new challenges to which women must adapt in order to protect their well-being. This chapter describes the challenges that mothers in Saskatoon face and the way in which these issues shape their subjectivities and impact their well-being. It also discusses participants'

personal concepts of well-being in order to determine which elements the Sewing Circle can address.

3.1 “I Struggled”: The Challenges of Motherhood in Saskatoon

Janet, a Euro-Canadian grandmother who raised her children as a single mother, remarks that in Saskatoon, while women’s shelters and crisis support centers are able to provide assistance in crises, “there’s a lot of women who just fall between the cracks because if they don’t have addictions or mental health issues, say, they’re just moms and they’re trying really hard, but they don’t fall where the resources are.” A lack of support means that many women are unable to access the resources they need to prevent challenges in their lives from complicating and escalating. In Saskatoon’s core neighborhoods, these challenges are often further complicated by poverty, lone parenthood, and the special challenges of grandmotherhood.

3.1.1 Poverty

Poverty is an ever-present reality for many core neighborhood women, with impacts not only on their way of life, but also on their sense of self. Power (2005) argues that the impact of poverty is compounded by neoliberal ideology which governs marginalized, impoverished lone mothers through “freedom and unfreedom”: the “unfreedom” of carefully scrutinized and controlled social benefits, and the value placed on freedom in western society which demands that individuals govern themselves through the pursuit of paid labor in order to achieve full personhood. Power found that Nova Scotian women receiving social assistance benefits were conscious of the negative perceptions of others, and felt they were treated as “less than human” by community service staff, who serve as what Lock and Scheper-Hughes call “agents of social consensus” (1987:27) and exert great control over their lives. Being controlled in this way was seen as humiliating and engendered a sense of failure at their own inability to make ends meet on the benefits they received (Power 2005). Feeling that their pursuit of employment, relationships

with others, and abilities as mothers were under scrutiny, these mothers resisted using resources that could ease their burdens: using a school breakfast program, for instance, was thought to draw attention to the consequences of their low income, and women worried that this may cause them to be seen as negligent by other parents. In this way, poverty contributed to the sense of isolation and marginalization already created by lone parenthood, and “in this context...it is not surprising that most of the women in the study reported keeping to themselves; having few, if any, friends; and relying mainly [on] one or two close family members for support” (Power 2005:651). Poverty not only creates challenges for impoverished mothers but also demands that they “go it alone.”

Participants in the Sewing Circle note that taking care of their children is more difficult on social assistance, hampering their ability to maintain a sustainable and wellness-supporting daily routine. Along with providing adequate housing and food, these mothers desire to provide a comfortable life for their children, including “extras” to keep their children entertained and happy. As Charlotte, a First Nations grandmother caring for two teenaged granddaughters, worries:

[My granddaughter] gets bored too, eh? ‘Cause she’s always in her room...And then yesterday she says ‘I’m getting so bored, mom!’ I says, ‘well, let’s go to Wal-Mart or something....Because I don’t have that much money too, eh? To go to movies. The only one I usually go to is on Tuesdays because it’s a lot cheaper.

Charlotte’s inability to afford extras such as movies is described as resulting in an inability to keep her granddaughter happy and entertained, a potential “failure” in her tasks as a custodial grandmother. Similarly, the confines of social assistance also restrict participants from enrolling their children in sports or buying them the clothing they want. As Power notes, this “desire to be able to buy whatever her daughter might want is not simply a materialistic impulse, but a fervent wish to be a better mother and a better citizen, as understood by those living in consumer

society” (2005:654). The inability to afford “extras” for their children may therefore have an impact on women’s understanding of themselves as effective and “good” mothers, affecting both their subjectivities and their well-being by signifying an inability to live up to the tasks they consider vital to the role.

For mothers and grandmothers raising older children, the boredom of poverty and living on social assistance becomes a bigger concern. Older children and teenagers are more difficult to entertain, may prefer to spend time alone or with friends instead of their parents, and may be motivated by boredom into unhealthy or destructive activities, increasing their caregivers’ worries. Charlotte continues: “the oldest one, she’s nineteen eh? Cause when she’s gone ‘til about two o’clock I wonder where she is. I hope she’s not drinking. It worries me lots.” Worries about boredom, early pregnancy, and involvement with alcohol is a source of stress for these mothers. Charlotte suggests that activities for youth that can be accessed for free would be instrumental in preventing the boredom she believes leads to bad behaviors, although as Celia, a European-Canadian lone mother of a twelve-year-old, notes, activities tend to be “meant for younger kids or older kids, there’s nothing for this age group.” The feeling of not being able to provide the “extras” that children need increases the stress of motherhood in conditions of poverty, increasing the challenge of both providing for children and of keeping them out of trouble. If, as Weisner argues, the maintenance of a healthy social ecology depends in part on “providing stability and predictability of the daily routine” (2009:229), the challenges and stresses these mothers endure can be harmful to their well-being and that of their family.

The experience of poverty and unemployment also has an impact on women’s self-image as productive members of society. Because “it is through work and consumption that members of contemporary western industrialized societies – including women – reach full citizenship”

(Power 2005:656), working and a feeling of productivity were identified by several participants as central to their sense of well-being, despite the prevalence of unemployment among the group. The inability to find work was named as a source of stress and a hazard to mental health. Helina, a married newcomer mother of four in her late forties, notes that due to difficulties with language and recertification, “for me it is difficult to find a job easily...to find a job that I can do, it needs like a special course or something, a special standard. So until I meet that standard I am going to lose my mind...sometimes when I’m staying home I will feel bad.” Because, as Virginia Dickie notes, “even the temporary curtailment of usual work activities can threaten an individual’s sense of being a productive member of society” (2003:259), unemployment presents a major threat to women’s positive sense of self, shaping “unproductive” subjectivities with consequences for both women’s self-image and their sense of possibility. For women who do work, however, the impact of employment on their identity as a mother has the potential to be equally damaging. As Janet explains,

Right now, the workforce says, ‘here, first of all, you want to work and you have children, you’re going to have to put them somewhere because they can’t come to work with you.’ And that’s going to cost you so much that whatever you take home, if there’s anything left for you to take home, isn’t going to make it worth it. *Somebody else is raising your children*, taking care of your children, so you can go out someplace, and it’s just not doable for a lot of women.

The contradiction between motherhood and engagement with the workforce, each demanded by Canadian neoliberal and patriarchal ideals, leaves many women feeling inadequate or guilty. However, according to Dickie, because one’s “identity as a worker includes a personal construction on the purpose and meaning of work” (2003:251), a sense of productivity may be achieved outside of paid labor if the individual recognizes his or her own labor as meaningful and industrious.

3.1.2 Lone Parenthood

The challenges of poverty are particularly pervasive for women who are lone parents. According to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment, and Labour's Status of Women Office, in 2006 13 percent of census families in Saskatchewan were lone-parent families headed by a woman, making up four out of every five lone parent families in the province (2009:1). While women who are lone parents report similar levels of education and employment and actually boast a higher average income than other women in the province, 35 percent still live below the low-income cutoff, compared with 15 percent of all women in Saskatchewan (2009:12). Living with higher household expenses on a single income leaves lone mothers' average household income far below the provincial average. In addition, one third of these women report an Aboriginal identity, and nearly one in four Aboriginal women in the province are lone parents (2009:4). The challenges of lone motherhood may be particularly detrimental to these mothers, for whom the extended family has historically played an important role (Quinless 2013). According to Castellano (2002), the extended family was once the major unit of organization in Aboriginal communities, dictating social and political life and distributing the responsibilities of parenting over a large network of caring kin. Although Aboriginal family structures have since been changed through European influence, including its emphasis on the nuclear family and the community and family disruption that resulted from generations of residential schooling, "the notion of the caring, effective, extended family, co-extensive with community, continues to be a powerful ideal etched deep in the psyche of Aboriginal people" (Castellano 2002:16).

Lipman and colleagues (2010) found that life as a lone mother is often characterized by isolation, stigma, and a sense of failure to make ends meet. Fear of judgment causes women to isolate themselves and resist reaching out for help, while the financial and emotional stress of

raising children alone makes parenting more difficult, leading to a sense of inadequacy as a mother. In this context, lone mothers tend to display higher levels of depression and stress and possess fewer social resources to cope with these problems, while their children often have higher rates of emotional and behavioral issues (Lipman et al. 2010). Several participants in the Sewing Circle report feeling isolated, leading to feelings of depression and a lack of purpose. Poverty limits their ability to get involved in community activities, including children's activities where they would have the opportunity to meet other mothers, and increases the stress of caring for children. There are few free activities for women in Saskatoon, particularly in the core neighborhoods where, according to Claire, a European-Canadian married mother of two, "they feel like they have nowhere to go and to talk to people." Isolation from other women and friends made some women feel as though they had "lost themselves" in favor of their children. As Claire explains: "I wasn't able to get out to moms' groups and stuff with my son, and I felt I didn't do enough for myself and that really got me down...If women don't get out and talk and do stuff they really feel like they don't have a purpose. You forget who you are, I guess." To Claire, being isolated from other adults and subsumed by her children's needs created stress and depression, reducing her ability to effectively parent her children. However, Lipman and colleagues (2010) found that after a group support intervention, lone mothers reported a decreased sense of isolation, and support from other mothers was encouraging, leading to improved self-esteem. In addition, they also reported improved parenting skills and communication with their children, likely attributable to lower levels of stress. Improved social support networks could therefore be expected to reduce the sense of isolation that lone parents and those in poverty experience, offsetting the negative effects of these factors and improving women's well-being.

3.1.3 Grandmotherhood

The limited literature on mothers of children who are past adolescence belies the fact that motherhood does not end when children have grown (Francis-Connolly 2000). Mothering “never ends” (Francis-Connolly 1998), and although the tasks and intensity of mothering change, women’s role and identity as mothers may continue throughout the lifespan. The days of changing diapers and running carpools over, their responsibilities tend to shift to instrumental (especially financial) and emotional support, and the provision and maintenance of a “home base” to which adult children can return in times of need or celebration. For some women, these tasks are pleasurable. As one woman interviewed by Fuller-Thomson notes, “this is the best part now, the payoff” (2000:285). They may enjoy the company of their adult children, revel in their successes, or delight in offering advice “on everything from buying a home to handling a colicky child to dealing with a relationship gone bad” (2000:286). However, women who live far from their grown children or do not maintain a relationship with them may find that their inability to fulfill these tasks leads to a sense of loss or inadequacy, or challenges their maternal identity. For others, the work of a mother and grandmother may only become more intensive, particularly for those who take on their struggling adult children’s responsibilities by caring for their grandchildren full-time.

According to Fuller-Thomson, between 1991 and 2001 the number of children under the age of 18 in Canada living with their grandparents increased by 20 percent (2005:332). In 1996, 17 percent of these households were First Nations, a number disproportionate to the representation of First Nations in Canada (Fuller-Thomson 2005:332). First Nations grandparent caregivers are more likely than their non-First Nations counterparts to be female, unemployed, and unmarried, and are less likely to possess a high school diploma (Fuller-Thomson 2005). Their median income is less than 70 percent of that of non-Aboriginal caregiving grandparents, despite caring

for more children on average (2005:336). The children they care for tend to be younger, and they spend more time on housework and childcare.

These situations, which Fuller-Thomson (2005) refers to as “skipped generation households,” create a unique set of challenges for grandparents who serve as caregivers. While grandparents are typically familiar with the challenges of raising children, the caregiver role is often assumed suddenly, and “adaptation to this major role transition is hindered by the unanticipated, ambiguous, and off-time nature of grandparent caregiving” (2005:339). These grandparents may continue to feel responsible for their children’s outcomes throughout their lives (Francis-Connolly 2000), leading them to take on both their own and their children’s responsibilities when their children’s obligations are not being met. This creates a double workload and financial burden for these grandparents, while they receive none of the support that should be ensured by the bond of kinship between themselves and their adult children. For some grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, caretaking is complicated by the often sporadic influence of the children’s parents, particularly those who suffer from addictions. As Dunlap, Tourigny, and Johnson note, in these situations “stress emanates from the conflict between one generation’s beliefs about what matters for family and for community, and the other generation’s behavior directly contravening those dictates” (2000:150). Furthermore, Rodgers and Jones found that the prioritization of biological parenthood increased the difficulty grandparent caregivers experienced in obtaining services, and “these grandmothers also indicated that they were treated like ‘second-class citizens’ because they were not the biological parents” (1999:463). Although Fuller-Thomson (2005) found that these grandparents enjoyed the company of their grandchildren, felt relief that their grandchildren were safe and that the family was kept together, and were often cared for by these children later on in life, they also reported higher levels of

poverty and overcrowded conditions, greater depressive symptoms, and limitations on their daily activities. Similarly, Rodgers and Jones (1999) note that although grandparent caretakers reported satisfaction that their grandchildren were being well taken care of, enjoyed the children's company, and found a sense of meaning and purpose in caring for them, they also experienced stress from the influence of their adult children, the financial challenges of raising children, and the sudden transition back into a parenting role late in life.

In Saskatoon, there are fewer resources for grandmothers, particularly those who care for their grandchildren, than for young mothers. There are fewer opportunities for grandmothers to socialize, as Tracy, the Sewing Circle instructor and coordinator, notes:

There's a lot of young moms groups, I know that. There's probably not a lot of things for older women, because we have a lot of older women that are, you know, grandmother ages....We have such an age range that a lot of these women probably have never had...a lot of opportunities to just be a part of a group.

Groups in which support, advice, and comfort can be shared are particularly important for grandparents who care for their grandchildren, who often shoulder these challenges along with those of single motherhood. As Charlotte explains, "I don't let my feelings out, eh? I mean, I wish I could...because I'm a single mom too, eh? It's hard to raise kids by myself." She continues, noting that the challenge of parenting her granddaughters is secondary to that of her relationship with her daughter, the girls' mother:

Even right now with my granddaughters, it's hard to deal with them, eh? I mean, they're good girls, but the only one that I have a problem with is my daughter....She comes with everything. I mean, 'you have my girls for this and that.' I don't like that, eh? So I just tell her stay away from us....I was just so stressed.

Because grandparent caregivers tend to occupy a lower status than biological parents (Rodgers and Jones 1999), and because grandparents often still feel obligation toward their grown children, they must manage conflicting values and parenting strategies, increasing the difficulty of raising children and leading to stress and familial conflict. Despite this, raising her

grandchildren is a source of pride and joy for Charlotte: “I just want them to have a good home. I did the best for both of them ‘til now....I’m so happy, like the time my granddaughter, she graduated...I could just cry for joy. ‘Cause I was just so happy, eh? Yeah, but I struggled...it was hard work. Yeah, but I did the best.” Despite the challenges she encounters in raising her grandchildren, caring for them is a source of self-esteem and well-being, allowing her to act in a way that supports a positive mother subjectivity.

For other women whose children are grown, the void left by the tasks of mothering may cause a crisis of identity, making it necessary to find other sources of “generativity.” The lack of a family to care for also deprives some grandmothers of kin support in their older age. As family structures have changed with fewer extended families and more working mothers, Janet worries that “there’s so many things that are lacking if you look at elder care for example, and...seniors fall between the cracks.” Groups like the Mothers’ Centre have the potential to recreate this nurturing home-care environment.

However, Reagon warns that while Mothers’ Centres should be a space in which “mothers define themselves, their concerns, and their interests, and nurture and empower each other” (Diquinzio 2010:313), because “they are predicated at least to some extent on exclusion, these nurturing spaces are always at risk of becoming little barred rooms” (2010:313), which provide a refuge for some mothers while excluding others. As Katie comments, “a lot of women feel like they...can’t join these things because they don’t have a kid,” excluding childless women or those whose children are grown. Similarly, mothers may be excluded from women’s groups on other bases such as sexuality or poverty. Not all “little barred rooms” are nurturing spaces, and “being nurtured” is not always conducive to empowerment. “Women” and “mothers” are not

homogenous groups, and their differences should foster conversation, creating a unifying space without being overly exclusionary or homogenizing.

3.2 “A Sense That Things Are Okay”: Perspectives on the Meaning of “Well-Being”

The impact of these challenges can be understood by examining the concepts of well-being among women in Saskatoon’s core neighborhoods, and addressing the discordance between these needs and their lived realities. The concept of well-being remains ambiguous and methodologically problematic, and therefore is often confined to discussion of biomedical “health” that ignores other influences on quality of life. According to Levin and Browner, for instance, “most researchers and practitioners...focus primarily on changing individual behavior to reduce the risk of disease instead of seeking to understand and strengthen the factors that create physical, psychological, and social health” (2005:746), an oversight with significant implications that threaten individuals’ overall well-being. Within the more context-oriented field of anthropology, the concept of well-being has often been seen as dangerously evaluative and subjective, and therefore tends to be considered a default state in the absence of suffering rather than a topic for study in its own right (Thin 2009). According to Thin, within anthropology “well-being is mainly understood...as a slight broadening of the concept of health, not as a focus for discussion of ultimate human values or the rich diversity of valued experiences” (2009:38). However, Thin argues that well-being, a part of human experience grounded in the values and worldviews each society holds dear, should be of central concern for anthropologists.

According to Mathews and Izquierdo well-being consists of four dimensions, which are considered almost universal though always perceived through a “prism of culture” (2009:261-262): physical well-being, which includes both biological health and physical pleasure; interpersonal well-being, which necessitates the maintenance of healthy social relationships and the fulfillment of social obligations; existential well-being, which depends upon an individual’s

alignment with their own and their community's values and the sense of leading a meaningful life; and finally the impact of national institutions and global forces on each of the other dimensions. Although the way in which each of these requirements will be fulfilled varies between societies, in general well-being will depend, to varying extents, on each of these four areas. For instance, the Saskatoon Aboriginal Women's Health Research Committee (2004) found that Aboriginal women in Saskatoon held a holistic view of health that "encompassed everything from spiritual understanding, to education and training and parenting skills" (2004:4), and the health of the individual was inextricable from the health of the family and community. The concept of dimensions of well-being also means that well-being may be achieved in some areas of life even if it is not achieved in others (Thin 2009), but these domains may also conflict with one another, a discordance with implications for the individual's ability to achieve an overall sense of well-being. Understanding the value that women place on different elements of well-being creates a clearer picture of what is required in order for women to "be well," permitting the identification of how programming such as the Sewing Circle might contribute to women's well-being, and of gaps where unaddressed elements of well-being may be targeted.

In line with Mathews and Izquierdo's theory, Sewing Circle participants describe well-being as the sum of various domains of their lives, with "well-being" defined by one participant as "a sense that things are okay...even if individual things might not be okay." While some participants emphasize physical health, noting the importance of exercise and healthy eating, they also stress the need to also nurture mental, spiritual, and emotional health. As Olivia, a First Nations lone mother of four noted, "you have to balance those so you don't feel, like, lost...or like something's missing in your life." Devoting attention to each of these elements may create a sense of a richer, fuller life, potentially contributing to a sense of meaning, purpose, and

fulfilling one's potential. This is consistent with Wilson 2004, who, using focus groups with Aboriginal women in Winnipeg, Manitoba found that although participants tended to emphasize caring for their bodies in line with a biomedical paradigm, they stressed that "to take care of our bodies, to be well...is to take care of all aspects – physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual – of ourselves and to maintain balance in our lives" (2004:11). Many participants, however, emphasize the centrality of social and emotional well-being, particularly the necessity of safe spaces, the maintenance of a positive social environment, the devotion of time to self-care, and the knowledge that their children are well cared for.

3.2.1 Safe Spaces

A sense of well-being, for many women, required the creation of safe spaces, both physically and socially through the presence of loved ones and a sense of mutual respect. As Katie, a First Nations lone mother of four, describes, well-being requires "being in an environment, well, putting yourself in a place that's healthy for you and not negative or going to put you in harm's way." This statement suggests that a "healthy" environment entails both a sense of physical and emotional safety, neither emotionally "negative" nor physically dangerous. Similarly, others described the necessity of "being in a happy place and your family," "hanging out with people that you love," and "having positive people around you," stressing the importance of maintaining a close and supportive social environment.

3.2.2 A Positive Social Environment

Emotional well-being is therefore supported by the maintenance of a positive social environment, which may create a sense of belonging and place in a community. Participants appreciate the opportunity to surround themselves with a positive group of others, with whom they share knowledge, discuss feelings, and maintain healthy lifestyles. Furthermore, being a part of a community creates a social support system in which individuals can look after one another,

creating a sense that “there are people that care about you...you have a sense that you’re not going to be abandoned or forgotten.” This sense of being cared for encourages the individual to care for themselves, as Janet describes:

So one of the women that we were sewing with, she’d hurt her hand, and I looked at it and...I was horrified because it was swollen, and it turned out that...this has gone on for a good two, three weeks....So I said, ‘you know, you really need to go get that checked out.’ And then the other woman who had already told her, she came over, ‘I told her that.’...Well, she was on the phone immediately making herself an appointment....She went to the doctor, and it turned out it had been, I think it was a break....She was cared for. So that was that. To me there was a physical well-being that took place there. But it came out of that part of people looking out for you and people who are concerned. And I think a lot of people, they don’t feel like anybody cares, so it’s kind of like why should they? So they let things go like that.

In this instance, the concern of others encouraged one woman to seek medical attention, translating a healthy social network and environment into improved physical health through positive social pressure.

3.2.3 Caring for Women as Individuals

Several participants also describe the importance of taking care of their emotional health as individuals, separate from the concerns of motherhood. In particular, they emphasize taking time for themselves and creating a sense of productivity and purpose apart from their children through paid work and the pursuit of healthy activities and hobbies. This reflects a desire to fulfill their potential, a component of well-being (Izquierdo 2009). As Claire notes, “if you don’t do enough for who, the person you are, it can really affect your home life and how your kids are....I struggled a lot with that and I could see how it affected my kids, my son.” In addition to impacting this participant’s mental health, neglecting her needs as an individual also impacted her perceived efficacy as a mother, potentially damaging this part of her identity.

3.2.4 Supporting Women as Mothers

Furthermore, according to O'Reilly (2013) mothers are deeply affected by the experiences of their children, suggesting that mothers' well-being may be affected by their perception of their children's well-being. Although personal development outside of the mother role is considered a vital component of women's well-being, participants also noted the importance of knowing that their children are happy, safe, and being cared for in a positive environment. Several mothers of older children express the desire for children's programming, including, in Celia's words, "opportunities...to hang out with your daughter doing positive stuff" The pursuit of individual mental and emotional well-being, particularly through self-care and the pursuit of activities apart from one's children, must therefore be balanced with the mother identity and supported in a mother-friendly environment, to avoid damaging one "domain" of well-being in favor of another.

Poverty, isolation, and the demands of mother and grandmotherhood limit women's ability to act in their social environment, decreasing their ability to pursue well-being and impacting their sense of themselves. However, participants' own concepts of well-being suggest a desire to actively pursue empowered subjectivities, living up to their potential through the maintenance of both personal and mother identities. However, performing such empowered mother subjectivities requires the development of skills, abilities, and mindsets that will allow women to function more freely despite their structural limitations. Sewing may be one such skill. The next section will discuss the empowering potential of sewing, including its impact on self-perception and its potential to negotiate the sewer's place in her social environment.

CHAPTER 4

“SEWING IS FOR EVERYBODY”: SEWING AS A SOURCE OF WELL-BEING

The practice of arts and crafts has long been recognized as a source of well-being, contributing to positive aging (Maidment and Macfarlane 2009), mental wellness (Parr 2006), and chronic illness management (Reynolds 2010) in addition to serving as a source of physical and mental pleasure for countless practitioners. However, the development of skill in textile arts has also historically been, and is today, a subversive act. Learning skills, according to Chaitlin and Lave, may be thought of as “changing participation in the culturally designed settings of everyday life” (Dilley 1999:35). This can be considered a form of empowerment, which according to the pedagogy of Paolo Freire refers to “human liberation so that learners can be subjects and actors in their own lives and in society” (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988:380). The empowering potential of education is not limited to formal or academic forms of learning. Instead, Bratich and Brush (2007) argue that crafting, too, can be considered a form of power. The development of proficiency in sewing not only provides a skill with which to ease household work and finances, but may also create a sense of competence, creativity, and self-worth that can extend to other parts of women’s lives. As a way of organizing for change, negotiating one’s social presentation, engaging in social networks on more equal ground, and building personal capacities, learning to sew can be understood as performative, a means through which women learn to engage with their context in new ways and take control of their lives. This section describes the impact of learning to sew on women’s self-perceptions and its role in increasing women’s agency in their larger social context, allowing them to better fulfill the roles they consider important and thereby improving their well-being.

4.1 “You Don’t Think Bad Things”: Sewing and Women’s Self-Perceptions

Women’s subjectivities are constructed out of repeated, socially prescribed actions, and agency emerges through variations on these performances. Learning to act in alternative ways is therefore a means of developing more empowered mother subjectivities. Pritash, Schaechterle, and Wood argue that “the textile arts can be rhetorically meaningful both through their products and their practice” (2009:16), and in addition to the tangible products of sewing, the development of skills and the act of sewing itself are, for some women, their “own private protest march” (2009:16). The empowering potential of sewing becomes apparent in participants’ descriptions of their feelings after learning to sew. In the Sewing Circle, participants describe learning to sew by hand, stitch on buttons, repair clothing, and navigate a fabric store, skills which also contributed to the development of time and stress management strategies. They also learned how to use a sewing machine and a serger, a specialized sewing machine designed to create finished seams and hems. With these skills in hand, participants describe overcoming personal limitations, an increase in their self-sufficiency, and a sense of productivity which contributes to a positive sense of self, promotes relaxation and a positive state of mind, and enables women to participate in an enjoyable pastime without guilt.

4.1.1 Overcoming Personal Limitations

According to Foss, when individuals set goals, “the exigency for action is internal; it is rooted in intrinsic motivation rather than one prescribed by the external environment” (Foss 1996:68). Because of this, learning to sew can be understood as an exercise of agency, based in the individual woman’s desires and efforts and leading to feelings of accomplishment, pride, and increased competence culminating in a more positive sense of self. For participants in the Sewing Circle, learning new skills is described as a process of overcoming personal barriers and surpassing personal limits. Participants describe learning to “conquer” the sewing machine, with

one focus group participant stating that “it was scary, but I got over it.” For women who already had some sewing or crafting skills, the Sewing Circle provided an opportunity to build on and surpass their abilities, as Helina notes: “I do handcrafts, but you need to decorate those things. I didn’t know how to use a sewing machine. Right now I know how to sew, use the sewing machine. I’m happy to learn that.” Furthermore, two participants suggest that they consider the use of a sewing machine to be more skillful than crafting by hand. As Katie explains,

At first when I heard about the sewing club I thought it was like...beading stuff, not the sewing machine, so it was, I guess more than I expected, because I was already prepared to learn how to bead...and then it was the sewing, like, with the sewing machines, and I got to learn how to use a sewing machine and I was like, whoa, okay.

Helina adds, “I know how to make hand-crafts by hand, but those things need to use a machine...it needs a sewing machine to make it correctly.” These statements indicate that skill in sewing may be considered performative, shaping more competent subjectivities. Because one’s identity as a productive member of society depends on his or her own recognition of their labor as productive (Dickie 2003), learning to perform tasks that one recognizes as skilled may help to shape a positive sense of self. As participants learned and practiced new skills, they may also have developed more self-confident and productive subjectivities.

Furthermore, to some women, learning to sew represented an opportunity to explore their potential and gain an understanding of their abilities. Charlotte describes her motivation to attend the Sewing Circle as a desire “just to learn more about sewing and what I can do.” Similarly, Claire remarks that she is “trying to make a purse right now, something I’ve never done before so I’m trying to challenge myself, see what I can actually do.” Surpassing their limits by learning new skills gave every participant a sense of accomplishment and excitement. After completing a fleece jacket, Katie describes a feeling of “wow! I actually finished it!” adding that “I had to do the zipper and everything.” Katie’s mother, Elise, notes that her favorite part of the Sewing

Circle is “completing projects, and I’m happy I can do it,” while Helina comments “if you learn a new skill which you don’t know it is really exciting.” Celia describes feeling a sense of accomplishment “last Thursday when [Tracy] was showing us the little makeup bags, and I said ‘well, how long is it going to take me to do one? Can I finish it today?’ And ‘oh, easily!’ And so yeah, right from start to finish it was done, so it was very nice to know that I can start something and finish it.” In my own participation, I was not exempt from this sense of accomplishment. Although I had some previous sewing skill, realizing that the elastic waistband of my skirt project looked much better than any I had previously sewn filled me with a sense of pride.

These completed projects also reflect the competencies and abilities of their creators, skill that is “substantiated by the reception of the work in the outside world” (Parker 2010:xx). Finished products provide a tangible marker of the maker’s skill and effort, and as Margaret, a volunteer sewing instructor, notes, “seeing a successful product produced is gratifying for the producer and a positive example for the rest of the family...seeing the big happy and proud smile when a project gets finished tells it all.” This pride was evident throughout the Sewing Circle. Olivia, trying on the skirt of her formal gown midway through the project, caught my eye to swirl the skirt around her hips with a laugh, showing off. Later, she presented me with a photograph of the dress, telling me “you should use this in your project” (see Figure 2). The achievement of goals and the reception of her products by others contributes to the sewer’s understanding of herself as skilled and capable, increasing her sense of agency and ability and contributing to more empowered subjectivities.

This may be particularly important for women who are socioeconomically marginalized. Janet speculates that:

There are a lot of women there that are on social assistance and that’s, you know, that’s fine. But I think what social assistance often does is it sort of robs people of the ability or

the understanding that they can be creative and...it's one of those soul-sapping things, if you will. And so the Mothers' Centre comes along and says well here, you can make stuff, and I think it's that people can generate things, they can make things with their own hands and they can be creative that starts to build back that sense of self-esteem or self-worth...and then it's a springboard to other things, you know, that if they can learn that, that's not the only thing they can learn. It really puts life back into anyone...I think it really does put life back into you and brings back that core part of you that's creative and lively.

According to Janet, creativity revives a “core part of you that's creative and lively,” and the opportunity to exercise creativity in one arena, the Sewing Circle, is conceptualized as a “springboard” from which women learn to see themselves as more capable. Learning a skill and exercising creativity through sewing, therefore, may be considered performative, enabling women to understand themselves as more creative individuals and inspiring them to exercise creativity in other areas of life. This is clear from the responses of other participants, who express the desire to learn to knit or do other crafts and eagerly describe the projects they wish to complete in the future. The desire to push beyond what they had already done indicates that along with learning skills, participants have become more confident in their ability to learn.



Figure 2: Olivia's formal gown.

4.1.2 Self-Sufficiency

Creativity involves choices, decision-making, and problem-solving (Myzelev 2009), and each decision is an exercise of competence (Foss 1996), leading to an increased sense of agency, confidence, and self-sufficiency. The opportunity to make successful and fruitful decisions on one's own enhances the sewer's sense of her own abilities, increasing her confidence in her actions and decisions and enabling her to put to use the skills she has acquired. This is evident in participants' assertions that learning to sew has enabled them to work more independently, develop projects on their own, and sew at home without the supervision of the sewing instructor.

The ability to sew alone is named by several participants as a major appeal and result of the Sewing Circle. Celia, who had previously learned some quilting from a friend, describes her motivation to attend the Sewing Circle as a desire "to get to better my quilting skills and learn more so that I'm not just piggybacking off of my friend all the time, so I can learn how to do it on my own." For Celia, improving her sewing skills is a way to increase her independence and self-sufficiency, a desire that materialized for many participants after several weeks of sewing instruction. For instance, Janet remarks that

Oh my gosh, when I sew now? I'm learning so much of the technical stuff that I save way more time. Like at home when I'm sewing, I guess I know how to do this so I'm not taking everything apart, you know? I can do it right the first time and I don't have to figure out 'how am I going to do this?' and so, you know, it's really been a gift.

The competence and confidence Janet acquired through developing her sewing skills allows her to sew alone, to save time, and to navigate projects with ease. I discovered this for myself later on, as, sewing a dress at home that refused to fit, I realized I knew how to take apart and reassemble the dress to adjust the size rather than abandon the project. Being able to sew at home without the assistance of the instructor allows participants to use their skills to complete household projects such as mending and hemming clothing, increasing their ability to act within

and for their households and families. Tracy confirms the potential of the Sewing Circle to produce independent sewers, stating “we’ve worked with a lot of new sewers who had no real, well, very little skills in the sewing areas, and are now feeling very confident with what they can do.” Enhanced self-sufficiency in sewing also means that outside of the Sewing Circle, participants’ skills will be self-sustaining, allowing them to practice and improve on their own.

The ability to perform these tasks may also lead to an overall sense of increased independence and personal self-sufficiency, which may give women the confidence to act in other areas of their lives. For Celia’s twelve-year-old daughter, Taylor, whom she homeschools:

it’s been very beneficial...because she has to get everything set up, ‘cause [Tracy’s] not going to come along and plug in the sewing machine and start the bobbin and do all of that for her. She has to get her own stuff ready, she has to be able to read the pattern, she has to be able to do all that stuff on her own. I’m there to help if she needs it, but it’s been great for her to do it on her own also.

For Taylor, Celia reports, the Sewing Circle is an opportunity to learn to work on her own, increasing her patience and independence (see Figure 3). Successful participation in sewing validates women’s abilities and competence and instills them with the confidence to act upon their decisions in other areas of life. Learning to act with confidence and autonomy may promote more confident and autonomous identities, helping participants to feel more capable of fulfilling their roles in daily life.



Figure 3: Taylor's projects, an apron and make-up bag.

4.1.3 Productivity

Finally, sewing is understood as a way to fill free time, replacing harmful or less productive activities. Because “people’s willingness to participate in any particular community of practice is contingent on how their interactions within that community of practice are in line with their investments in multiple imagined communities and the conceptualizations of identity that go along with these imaginations” (Vickers and Deckert 2013:120), participation in an activity must not conflict with women’s responsibilities toward their families. Sewing’s motherly, homey, and industrious connotations help women to avoid the guilt that often accompanies taking time for themselves. According to Myzelev, one major benefit of sewing may be “the opportunity to do something deliberately unrushed” (2009:153) while simultaneously becoming ““domestic goddesses”” (2009:153). Women are able to practice an activity that is useful in their own eyes and those of others while taking control of their time “when it is almost impossible because of the pressures of multifaceted lives” (Myzelev 2009:153). The Sewing Circle creates opportunities for women to participate in an activity that is both enjoyable and productive, simultaneously “for themselves” and “for others.” This allows women to engage in an activity

for themselves without jeopardizing their mother identity. For instance, Claire contrasts sewing with spending time on the internet: “In my few minutes of spare time I have at home I try to do something different instead of just staring at my phone. Facebook’s bad!” Replacing a “bad” habit with a “good” one increases Claire’s sense of productivity, allowing her to use her spare time in a way that contributes to her self-image. In the midst of other responsibilities, the productivity of sewing legitimates its practice, allowing women to carve out time to nurture themselves as individuals. Furthermore, the productivity of sewing may help women to see themselves as fulfilling their responsibilities and their potential, contributing to their well-being.

One way sewing nurtures mothers is by helping them to avoid negative thoughts, protecting their mental well-being by reducing stress and creating a calmer state of mind. A lack of paid work or hobbies outside of motherhood may lead to feelings of boredom or depression, while the demands of motherhood can cause stress. These negative feelings can be mitigated by keeping busy, which keeps participants’ minds off of outside stressors and leads to a sense of calm and relaxation: while sewing, “the multiplicity that normally characterizes her life yields, in this space, to simplicity” (Foss 1996:69). As Margaret notes, “handwork like knitting, sewing, weaving, beading, crocheting or stitching is very meditative and has been a great source of wellbeing for generations of women.” Similarly, Claire describes sewing as “calming, relaxing. It takes you away from the troubles that you have, the stress of life, I guess. You kind of get into that zone of, you have something to do and you just focus your energy on that.” Helina, who has struggled with homesickness and sadness since moving to Canada, notes her positive state of mind while sewing:

If you do something for yourself you will feel happy and excited. You don’t think bad things...when I sit alone in my home I will think about my past life, and I will feel sad...but if you work every time, if you are busy...you just think what you are going to do.

Sewing therefore reduces stress and increases feelings of calm and happiness, as Helina adds: “when I participate in this program I’m really happy...this time is like a leisure place for me.” In addition, particularly for mothers with children at home, “creative activities help women maintain a generative identity beyond the identity they get from raising their children” (Adams-Price 2008:325). As Claire describes, “I used to sew a lot, but I gave up a lot of that stuff just to spend time with my children, but I realized I really need to do more for myself as well, for my well-being and my sanity.” For Claire, taking time to sew does not detract from her abilities as a mother, but adds to them by protecting her mental well-being: “I’m able to care for my kids better, because I’m not so stressed out and grouchy.” In this way, the Sewing Circle may support “motherselfhoods” which nurture both mother and individual identities, thereby lessening the sense of conflict mothers often experience between these identities.

When asked to describe their understanding of well-being, several participants referred to “having a hobby,” “keeping busy,” or “being productive during the day” as part of a healthy lifestyle. Sewing has an impact on women’s mental well-being and sense of themselves as useful and productive individuals, keeping them away from bad habits and encouraging a healthy self-image. However, the benefits of learning to sew or engaging in other productive hobbies may not be limited to the individual woman. Helina contends that productivity is contagious and benefits both the individual and the community:

When you see someone is working, you will follow that person. If you drink and go around I will follow you again...if I have nothing to do, I will learn something bad, like to smoke...if you lose your mind you will do whatever bad, you know, but if you make yourself busy and if you find something you can do, you will be busy and you’re never tempted.

Learning to sew may allow women to act as positive role models in their communities. If, as McFarlane and Fehir argue, “the same process of empowering individuals can be extended to a community” (1994:382), the Sewing Circle may contribute to both “the individual women’s self-

esteem and the collective community self-esteem” (1994:392), creating a stronger community based on empowerment.

4.2 “I Learned How to Help Myself”: The Benefits of the Products of Sewing

In addition to the benefits of the process of sewing, its products can also have an impact on the sense of self of the sewer. According to Metcalf, “craft objects can stand back and offer commentary, propose reforms, advocate traditions, or simply try to help people get by” (2007:19). As they have throughout history, the products produced by sewing can improve women’s ability to creatively and willfully impact their social and physical environment, thereby increasing their empowerment. For participants in the Sewing Circle sewing reinforces and expresses multiple identities, enhances personal networks through gift-giving, and increases economic independence by increasing women’s ability to influence the household budget without increasing income.

4.2.1 Crafting Identities

First, sewing can contribute to mothers’ well-being by providing them with an opportunity to negotiate and express their identities. Victor de Munck conceptualizes identity as an adaptation, “a communicative, integrating, adaptive device and serves as the platform by which an individual engages his or her behavioral environment” (2013:191). Identities are shaped and used in response to various “idniches,” or contexts. They give the individual a semblance of control over their internal and external environment, and “the feedback system between identity and idniche provides a person with a stable footing in the world and a way of orienting to the world and to other identities both within and outside of the skin” (2013:192). Identities orient the individual, inform their actions, words, and attitudes, enable them to behave effectively in their various social contexts and roles, and determine how they will be perceived by others. The development of adaptive identities therefore has the potential to support well-being by

empowering individuals to more effectively carry out the tasks they consider important and present a positive self-image in their social environment. Furthermore, as adaptations to the environment, Daniel Oliver argues that identity is “creative, performed, and improvised, and should be read forwards, fluid and open; not read backward, as fixed, and determined” (2011:17). Identities are constantly shifting and adapting, and therefore can be constructed through performance, including skill development. This means that identities may be constructed and expressed through craft, enabling the craftworker to build a positive sense of self, present this image to others in her social environment, and adapt to changing social contexts.

Because crafting involves producing an object in accordance with the sewer’s intentions, it can be understood as a way of “finding...form for thought” (Parker 2010:xx). This means that the products produced through sewing are an extension of the artist who sewed them, providing a material marker of the individual. At the end of a project the sewer “holds in her hands a coherent object which exists both outside in the world and inside her head” (Parker 2010:xx), a tangible source of pride and affirmation that reflects back on the her own skills. Parker likens this process to the process of identity formation that takes place between a mother and child: “The child sees in the mother’s face a reflection of him or herself, mediated by the mother’s feelings of love and acceptance. The embroiderer sees a positive reflection of herself in her work and, importantly, in the reception of her work by others” (2010:xx). Craftwork, therefore, is an affirmation of the self and an opportunity to negotiate one’s presentation in their social environment.

Although most home sewers, including those in the Sewing Circle, use sewing patterns, “the uniqueness of the object comes through the choice of textures, colors, tension, and more importantly by the unique touch of one’s hand” (Myzelev 2009:151). The sewer must choose the

pattern, the fabrics, and the color combinations. Patterns, fabrics, and decorations may be mixed or matched according to the sewer's imagination and desire. Often such decisions bring new challenges which sewers must negotiate by drawing upon their knowledge and skill set, and therefore crafts serve as a marker of the individual's skill and abilities. By learning to sew, alter or design patterns, and use the endless array of fabrics, notions, and designs available to her, the sewer is therefore "free to develop her own image of herself, unconstrained by others' expectations or the stock of readymade garments available in stores" (Foss 1996:64-65).

For participants in the Sewing Circle, sewing is seen as a way to access the clothing and items they need in order to present a positive image of themselves, an opportunity that every participant found both pleasurable and empowering. As Helina explains, "if you go to buy, to shop, maybe you can't find anything you want, everything you want, so if you know how to sew, you can choose any linen or pattern you want, and you can sew for your children and for yourself." Choices included colors, fabrics, patterns, and sizes. For instance, during one Sewing Circle session Helina designed a pillow sham to fit some unusually sized pillows she had at home, fashioning the shams in suitable colors to match her home décor. Unable to find the size and color of pillow sham she needed in stores, by sewing she was able to access exactly the product she desired. Because, as Hurdley argues, home displays "are the material with which people build stories of absent presence, a horizon beyond which the past and future, the otherworld and ideal self dwell" (2006:721), greater freedom to construct the home as desired is an opportunity to construct and display identities.

The opportunity to construct identities through sewing may be particularly important for women from marginalized and subordinated social and ethnic groups. Identities do not emerge in isolation, but instead are formed out of a "constellation of cultural models" (de Munck

2013:191), including history, attitudes, feelings, and goals. Individuals draw upon a multitude of cultural models which make up their subjectivity, determining their desires, their motivations, their perspective on the world, and their ways of interacting with it. However, according to Derné (2009), well-being is the result of a fit between one's aspirations, which are culturally shaped, and their accomplishments, which are structurally determined. This means that discordance between one's values, the values of mainstream society, and the potential of one's circumstances can lead to reduced well-being. This is particularly important for those who must negotiate multiple, changing, and sometimes conflicting cultural demands, such as Aboriginal peoples and new immigrants to Canada. Izquierdo (2009), for example, points out that among the Matsigenka of Peru the inability to carry out culturally significant tasks in a shifting cultural environment has led to a decline in individuals' sense of well-being despite improvements in their overall biomedical health. Well-being requires individuals, especially the socially marginalized, to balance a multitude of cultural values.

Sewing provides an opportunity to negotiate a balance between competing identities and cultural models, allowing participants to live up to their aspirations in a society in which these aspirations may not fit. Despite current trends that interpret craft, especially knitting, as a rebellion against tradition (Bratich and Brush 2011), within craft, tradition is often valued. According to Metcalf, "each of the craft disciplines has a multicultural history that is recorded mostly in the form of objects...[and] a huge body of objects serves as an enormous reference library for craftspeople" (2007:6). Practicing a craft necessarily draws upon generations of practice, experience, and ingenuity even as the meaning of the craft is reinterpreted. This serves the purpose of valuing parts of tradition while altering them to fit the values and lifestyle of the practitioner. As Metcalf states, "to affirm the value of tradition suggests a view of society in

which the familiar is recognized and valued” (Metcalf 2007:20). An appreciation of the value of “the familiar” is also an affirmation of heritage and daily life, and “to craft, tradition is not necessarily backward, corrupt, or a restraining force in civilization; it is not an anchor, but a rudder” (Metcalf 2007:20).

The opportunity to access clothing and items that may be otherwise unavailable is one way the Sewing Circle helps to negotiate competing cultural models. Clothing represents “a complex link between the private domain of the body and the public domain of the sign...the visible interface of self and social” (Baert 1998:75), and “these garments serve to critically foreground fantasy, memory, gender, sexuality, and history through the indirect depiction of embodied being” (1998:75). By representing the “social sitedness” of the body (Baert 1998), dress provides a powerful symbol with which to express gendered, ethnic, and personal identity. While the creativity of sewing enables women to access unique items that suit their own wants and needs, it also allows them, particularly those outside of the ethnic majority, to claim, express, and take pride in their heritage and identity. Helina explains that

I wanted to learn this sewing, how to use a sewing machine because I like...long African dresses, but when I ask many people ‘I will pay you, can you make it for me?’ they refuse. I feel angry and I have to find a source how to learn this, how to use this sewing machine.

Although she had previously been unable to access the type of dress she desired, limiting her ability to dress in a way that reflects her values, Helina is now able to sew them on her own and takes pleasure in constructing them out of beautiful, flowing fabrics. This allows her to construct her identity and presentation in the way she desires, possibly allowing her to live up to specific cultural and gendered expectations.

Furthermore, Minahan and Cox (2007) argue that craft has also been used as a way for Indigenous groups to reestablish their place, influence, and value in the nation-state. For

Aboriginal Peoples on the northern plains, an interest in sewing, especially quilting, was the result of cultural contact with Europeans (MacDowell 2009). Although there were precedents to quilting in more traditional crafts such as hide painting and beading, with the introduction of manufactured cloth and needles sewing was quickly adopted, and these materials were combined with or replaced their traditional counterparts as large-scale hunting declined (Medicine 1997). The history of Aboriginal quilting is one of resistance. Early on, mission schools and churches offered formal instruction and women's social quilting groups (MacDowell 2009), which "continued in the pattern of the older traditional porcupine quillwork societies" (Medicine 1997:113) and were recognized and honored as a major contribution to the community. Later, within residential and industrial schools, "from the beginning, church and state officials wanted the schools to teach Native children to become self-sufficient manual laborers" and therefore "girls spent most of their time learning household duties such as cleaning, cooking, and sewing – the skills administrators felt a 'proper' wife and mother would possess" (Pettit 1997:245-246) while boys learned farming and trades. The oppressive and traumatic history of the residential schools, however, did not dampen Aboriginal enthusiasm for quilting, and far from eliminating Aboriginal art and cultural practices, quilting instead was incorporated into traditional art forms. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the family became the primary venue for learning to sew, and "by the turn of the 21st century, quilts could be found in nearly every Native community" (MacDowell 2009:132). According to MacDowell, "as Native peoples began to pass on knowledge of skills within their own contexts for learning, they also began to use quilts for purposes unique to their culture, and as instruments to convey a sense of identity and express feelings and ideas" (2009:132). The choices of color, themes, and designs incorporate Aboriginal

meanings and symbolism, adapting the tools and techniques of quilting to instead honor and reflect Aboriginal lifestyles and traditions.

The desire to express Aboriginality through sewing was present from the beginning of the Sewing Circle. The necessarily simple early projects acquired, for several participants, meaning beyond their use value. Margot sewed one of the first projects, a simple apron, as a gift for her granddaughter. She explains that she was beginning to teach the girl to make bannock, and sewed the apron for her granddaughter as a way to encourage her cultural development.

Similarly, for another participant, an early skirt project became an opportunity to sew a skirt for use in a powwow. These women adapted the meaning of their projects to support, project, and pass on their Aboriginal identities. Later on in the Sewing Circle, as participants' skills developed, a star blanket project was introduced, and was taken up by almost every participant, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Star or sunburst quilts, an adaptation of traditional patterns formerly painted on hides, serve important symbolic role in many plains Aboriginal societies (Medicine 1997). They are used as door coverings for shelters at ceremonial events, worn by healers in curing ceremonies and are given away at honoring ceremonies for various life events, especially births, naming ceremonies, marriages, and deaths (Medicine 1997). More recently, star quilts have been used to honor politicians, high school sports stars, and military veterans (MacDowell and Dewhurst 1997). For infants, the presentation of a star quilt "[recognizes] the child's entrance into the extended family" (Medicine 1997:113), but "at whatever age, the star quilt is a symbol of prestige, sentiment, and 'belongingness'" (1997:113). The ability to sew these blankets represents more than the development of skill in quilting, but instead the ability to claim, express, and value Aboriginal heritage. In the last Sewing Circle I attended, the tables were scattered with star blankets in progress, along with a jingle skirt being constructed for a

pow-wow. One First Nations woman, having finished the cover for her star blanket, threw the blanket over her shoulders and handed another woman her phone to take a picture. For these women, learning to sew enables them to express and promote their values, potentially increasing their pride in themselves and their sense of Aboriginal identity. Furthermore, it lessens the contradictions engendered by living with multiple and changing cultural models, allowing participants to live up to their aspirations and desires and ultimately supporting their well-being.

4.2.2 Negotiating Class

In addition, sewing has long been a way for skilled home seamstresses to negotiate their families' presentation of class (Gordon 2004), and may therefore serve as a route to a sense of social empowerment. Objects are not neutral, but instead are imbued with cultural meaning. Craft items become symbols of skill and self that are tangible, visible, and travel outside the home (Gordon 2004), becoming "a deeply personal expression of the embodied self, whereby personal flair reveals both innate ability and a cultivated style" (Prentice 2008:57). Wearing or clothing family members in the products of this skill expresses both the sewer's ability and elements of their identity, including class standing. The identity that is expressed through sewing can be negotiated to the sewer's advantage, allowing her to project a financial status that might otherwise be out of reach.

For example, Olivia, who, with the help of the sewing coordinator, sewed a formal dress for a special event, comments that "it was like anyone else's dress at my [event]. Lots of people dressed up like that...I probably wouldn't have had a...dress if it wasn't for them. I would have wore just like a casual dress or something." The opportunity to participate in the Sewing Circle and learn the skills that allowed her to produce the dress enabled her to subvert the financial difficulties that would otherwise have distinguished her from others at the event, instead allowing her to project an image of higher class standing. Sewing the dress with the assistance of

the Sewing Circle enabled Olivia to participate in the larger community on a more equal level, defying the limitations of her economic class. Similarly, Helina, a former teacher who has not yet been able to find work in Canada, noted her pride in sewing an apron for her English teacher, an opportunity to participate in a relationship based on mutual giving rather than dependency (Reynolds 2010). Such opportunities are particularly important for women whose roles have changed due to age, loss of work, or health status, and can be an important source of self-esteem.

Furthermore, sewing is perceived by many women as an opportunity to influence their household budget without earning a wage. Mothers appreciate the opportunity to sew clothing “for real life,” and learn household skills such as hemming and mending. The possibility of saving money by making, repairing, or altering clothing, especially for children, is noted as a major appeal of the Sewing Circle. Helina notes that “sometimes if you couldn’t find a job...if I can sew for my children it will help us, rather than to buy from outside.” For Margot, a First Nations grandmother, producing clothing is a matter of necessity: “I was almost homeless so I decided to make a shawl so I could keep warm.” Similarly, for Christine, a part-time student who converted a blanket into a shawl, “it’s important for me to fix things I have rather than buy new things.” A student myself, I similarly found that with a thrift store pattern and fabric I was able to stitch up an office-worthy dress for under six dollars. For each of these women, the opportunity to learn how to sew offered a way to stretch limited budgets and achieve greater self-reliance. Sewing may therefore make improved standards of living and undertakings such as education more viable, decreasing the stress of a low income and increasing the possibility of a better life.

In addition to saving money, several participants indicate that they view learning to sew as a way of developing skills for employment or entrepreneurship. Although most of the participants are beginners and have not yet achieved the skill level required, the desire to learn how to sell

items for added income is common. For Helina, who has had trouble finding work since moving to Canada, learning to sew represents an opportunity to participate in the economy in the way she can:

If I have a special design, I can make it and sell it...if I get a machine I can help myself to practice more...and to help myself, because, like to do heavy jobs, my age right now is weighing...it may help me to do my own job or to find something I can do....it will help me to help myself...it is a professional job.

To Janet, the Sewing Circle represents an opportunity to forge a mother-friendly work environment, developing individuals' skills and using them to generate income while avoiding the barriers to women's employment that are present in the mainstream workforce. She explains:

If you have women who really are learning how to do things and to be industrious, I think that that's going to maybe foster a lot of energy in terms of creating stuff, and then in terms of creating the income. Or, you know...the group as a whole decides how to care for *our* children...we could start to see individual people's skills...I think you start to see people's individual talents and abilities that come out and sort of further you a long that sort of, I don't know, self-development road, if you will. And I think in that sort of context that's what you're going to see, I really do. The possibilities are kind of endless, I think.

By eliminating the childcare and material barriers to women's employment, the Sewing Circle has the potential to fuel women's entrepreneurial dreams, and is therefore seen as a means of taking a semblance of control over one's economic status.

4.2.3 “Gifts of Time and Love”: Enhancing Social Networks

Beyond its economic advantages, sewing contributes to mothers' ability to care for their families and manage their social networks. Although for most women sewing is no longer a necessary part of taking care of a family, with readymade clothing widely available and often less expensive than fabric, producing and giving gifts for family members, especially children, incorporates “the craft-making practice into the women's practice of mothering as a particular kind of nurturing, at the same time tangible and symbolic” (Grace, Gandolfo, and Candy 2009). Janet, for example, crafted her first skirt project as a gift for her pregnant daughter-in-law, a way

to “pass it along to another mother” (see Figure 4). Furthermore, gift giving creates a sense of purpose and an “experience of mattering to others” (Maidment and Macfarlane 2009:23), creating feelings of self-worth and appreciation. Particularly for marginalized women “this is potentially a form of women reclaiming and validating their nurturing social roles on their own terms” (2009:23), supporting a positive sense of self. Such opportunities to contribute are “perhaps particularly important in older age, when one’s sense of oneself as a ‘contributor’ or with something meaningful to offer may have diminished due to the role changes associated with aging” (Maidment and Macfarlane 2009:18). Gifts provide a way for women to contribute to social relationships on more equal terms, creating, in the words of the Sewing Circle coordinator, “gifts of her time and love.”



Figure 4: A skirt for Janet's daughter-in-law.

Participants enjoyed giving gifts to others, and described feelings of appreciation, affirmation, and pride as a result. As mentioned, Helina made one of her first projects, an apron, for her English as a Second Language teacher who enjoys cooking: “I’m happy he took it

because...every time when we went to school...he ask me, 'I want to see what you did in the Sewing Circle'...he said he was excited, and I gave it to him, the apron, so he was very happy, and even for me, I feel excited." Charlotte, who made pyjamas and shirts for her granddaughters, explains that she wanted "just to make my grandkids happy and appreciate what I am doing for them...I like it when they say I did a good job" (see Figure 5). Katie describes her excitement:

When I finished my fleece jacket...and then so I just gave it to my kids' grandma, and she fit it really good, and when I gave it to her she was like 'no [Katie]!' Because I was showing her as I was progressing, making it, I was showing her...what I was doing, and then at the end she was like so happy with it that she was like 'no, I can't take this from you!' and she was just so happy that I actually gave it to her.

These gifts represent the culmination of much effort and hard-earned skill, and the admiration of others for the project reflects back favorably on the producer, increasing their sense of competence and self-esteem. Sewing gifts therefore simultaneously reinforces social networks and improves the self-image of the producer through the affirmation of others, enabling her to see herself as more capable and shaping her identity.



Figure 5: Charlotte's pyjamas.

4.3 Sewing and Well-Being

According to Pollard and Rosenberg (2003), well-being depends on one's ability to successfully carry out tasks that they and their cultural community consider productive and

significant, the ability to adapt to and manage changes and problems in daily life, and a sense of living up to one's potential and fulfilling one's purpose. Sewing contributes to the well-being of Sewing Circle participants therefore in two major ways. First, by encouraging new ways of being and acting in the world, the Sewing Circle crafts more empowered identities, increasing participants' sense of their own ability to fulfill their responsibilities and potentials and to manage challenges. Secondly, the Sewing Circle creates new opportunities for women to act in their environments in more agentive and empowered ways, actually increasing participants' ability to successfully perform the roles they consider important.

According to Butler (1990), identity and subjectivity are shaped through the repeated and public performance of socially condoned actions. Within the Sewing Circle, new "performances" are taught and supported, shaping participants' subjectivities. By encouraging the development of skills beyond what the participant previously considered possible, the Sewing Circle encourages the performance of more competent and confident subjectivities; by encouraging women to sew with increasing independence, it shapes more independent identities. Through learning new performances, women learn to understand themselves differently, increasing their self-esteem, understanding of their capacities, and sense of their ability to carry out their roles. They learn to see themselves as productive, often in the absence of paid labor, and self-sufficient, able to manage the demands of their lives with more finesse. Through these altered self-perceptions, constructed through the performance of more empowering actions, women's confidence in their ability to fulfill their potential increases, and, therefore, so does their well-being.

The Sewing Circle also contributes to well-being by actually increasing women's ability to act in their daily lives, improving their capacity for agency despite structural barriers. Through

sewing, participants are able to access gifts to support their social networks and contribute to these networks on more even ground. They are able to claim and express their cultural heritage, enabling them to live up to demands and standards that they might still deem significant despite differences from the priorities of mainstream Canadian society. They are able to access the products they want and need while expressing identities through the construction of unique items. Finally, participants can stretch small budgets through sewing, enabling them, to some small extent, to live in ways that might otherwise be considered beyond their means and increasing their sense of their own ability to live a productive and positive life despite financial constraints. In this way, the Sewing Circle acts as a site of “re-sourcement” (Foss 1996), allowing women to live as though their lives are the way they want them to be. This new ability to live a somewhat more empowered life is also performative, shaping participants’ identities as they learn and act and increasing their senses of themselves as more capable and efficacious in daily life. This contributes to their well-being by increasing their sense of leading a productive and valuable life and enabling them to cope with the challenges of their lives.

Learning to sew increases women’s understanding of their own abilities, serves as an enjoyable hobby that does not interfere with their mother identity, and generates momentum in their creativity, enabling them to envision a future in which they can use these skills to sculpt a better life on their own terms. The ability of the Sewing Circle to model a matricentric work and social environment may also shape women’s understanding of their role in society, providing positive social networks, ways of relating, and opportunities for cooperation that have the capacity to empower women. The next chapter examines the social element of the Sewing Circle, and its potential to “connect each member’s skills, competences, and creativity” (Bratich and Brush 2011:248) for the empowerment and well-being of all involved.

CHAPTER 5

“THEY’RE TAKING CARE OF EACH OTHER”: FORMING A MATRICENTRIC SOCIAL NETWORK

An individual’s social context can influence their self-perception and can therefore serve as a site of identity formation, empowering or disempowering them by constructing their sense of reality and possibility. According to Arthur Kleinman, experience is not entirely personal but instead forms “the intersubjective medium of social transactions in local moral worlds” (1995:97), and through interaction with the social environment, human beings develop as “intersubjective forms of memory and action” (1995:117). Throughout much of Canadian history, textile arts groups have provided the opportunity for women to establish supportive social networks. Today, these networks have the potential to empower women by validating their knowledge and work, acting as a space in which to “safely speak the truth of their maternal experiences” (O’Reilly 2013:193), and providing tangible and emotional support. In interviews with participants in the Sewing Circle, social networking and support emerged as a major theme, and because social support is also noted as a major component of well-being, this is a way in which the Mothers’ Centre can support the well-being of mothers. From the physical space of the Mothers’ Centre to the opportunity to help and teach others, women described the many elements that contributed to the development of a unique mother-friendly, intercultural, and intergenerational social network. In this chapter, I first discuss the conditions met by the Mothers’ Centre which support the formation of a strong social network: matricentricity, a sense of “equality” and common ground among participants, and the maintenance of a physically and emotionally comfortable environment. I then go on to describe the social network developed by the Sewing Circle: an intercultural, intergenerational community of practice in which, in Janet’s words, “somebody’s taking care of you...they’re taking care of each other.”

5.1 Creating an Environment of Empowerment

Interaction between women offers “the possibility of defining a self that transcends the place accorded to it within a male language and culture” (O’Connor 1998:119), providing a space for the renegotiation of maternal subjectivities. More than a source of social support, friendships between women have long served political purposes, acting as a locale for networking, organization, and consciousness raising, familiarizing women with the circumstances, challenges, and oppression of themselves and others, and asserting “women’s right to substantiate their own experiences” (Madriz 1998:117). According to Esther Madriz, “although caricatured as gossip in a male-centred culture...testimonies, individual or collective, become a vehicle for listening and capturing the socioeconomic, political, and human voices of women” (1998:116). Historically, this coming together of women was facilitated by groups which allowed them to meet while performing their duties as wives and mothers. In the words of Faith Wilding and the Critical Arts Ensemble, “the organizing cell for the first phase of feminism was the sewing circle, the quilting group, or the ladies’ charity organization” (1998:48), where women’s movement into a feminized public space represented a political act while maintaining their duties and reputation. Subverting patriarchal demands required a balance between responsibility and rebellion.

Today, women’s ability to forge friendships continues to depend on the circumstances of their lives: the spaces and resources to which they have access, the daily activities for which they are responsible, and the social networks to which they are tied by duty (O’Connor 1998). In order for women to access the empowering benefits that friendship can provide, social network development must be done in a way that is cognizant and supportive of women’s lived realities, and must be focused on the development of women’s strengths. In this way, mothers’ work is redefined as valuable, and women’s strengths are seen as emerging from those contributions and

efforts not always recognized by mainstream society. According to Bratich and Brush (2007), groups based on affective labor, such as caregiving and its related labors of love, produce community, subjectivity, and meaning within a woman-controlled space:

Often noted for being women-only spaces where production of physical objects and communication take place, these temporary autonomous zones provided a different kind of subject-formation. These spaces would function to allow women to swap stories, skills, knowledge, strategies, and generally speak about the more oppressive aspects of the social home....Seen as idle work, a waste of time, and unproductive activity from the perspective of capital and masculinized value, these forms of craft-work don't get integrated into profit-making systems but get marginalized as, at best, use-value objects or a cost-cutting measure. Precisely in this diminution as 'only' affective – as emotional – is where new figures and possibilities arise. [2007:10]

Through these connections, women are able to organize, discuss their experiences, and relearn the value of their labor, both physical and emotional. While often expressing no explicit political intent, craft groups emphasize “resourcefulness, local knowledge, and nonhierarchical organizational forms” (Bratich and Brush 2011:247), forging a space in which feminized labor is respected and valued and challenging “hegemonic forms of opposition and antagonism” (2011:254), allowing women to organize and resist in a way that fits their lives. Within the Sewing Circle, such a space is constructed through an emphasis on matricentricity, the establishment of common ground which fosters friendship, and emotional and physical security.

5.1.1 Matricentricity

O'Reilly (2013) argues that Mothers' Centres must be matricentric, acknowledging and addressing the specific needs that women encounter in their work as mothers. According to Bell and Coleman, “clear distinctions between friendship and kinship, if sometimes analytically useful and ethnographically very evident, are not always easy to sustain. The power of kinship as an idiom through which to express the power of all social relations considered to have binding qualities cannot be denied” (1999:6). Although, as Bell and Coleman (1999) argue, anthropology's emphasis on kinship encourages the neglect of other elements of human social

bonding and organization, the decline of the extended family in Canada has led to an increase in the importance of nonkinship networks as sources of affirmation, resources, and empowerment (Maidment and Macfarlane 2011b). Because identity is shaped by its social context, these networks also increasingly function as sites of identity formation, which “help define how a given person is to be perceived, by him/herself as well as by others” (Bell and Coleman 1999:16). These supportive structures are particularly important for young mothers, lone mothers, and the elderly, who lack the “help exchange” that typically exists between generations (Francis-Connolly 2000). Within the Sewing Circle, participants note that the age range of women present helps to recreate these family structures, and children, mothers of various ages, and grandmothers each have a role to play in reestablishing a nurturing environment. As Janet notes: “there’s something about that nurturing and nesting atmosphere where you get it all, like one generation to the next generation, you know, and there’s care given and respect given.” This nurturing environment celebrates and supports women in their needs as mothers and grandmothers, promoting their participation and their sense of self-worth.

Because, for many women, motherhood is considered a central part of their identity and a lifelong endeavor (Francis-Connolly 2008), mothers must be supported at all stages throughout the lifecycle, even as their needs change. For several grandmothers, for instance, the Sewing Circle represents an opportunity to spend time with young mothers and children, particularly when they cannot be around their own grandchildren. Because one’s identity as a mother does not necessarily end when their children have grown (Francis-Connolly 2008), being around children may be a way for these grandmothers to maintain this important part of their identity. As Janet explains, “I have four kids and a lot of grandkids but you know, I live far away so even just being around these young moms...there’s a warmth, and...I think there’s something that is

nurturing about that whole process.” Similarly, Charlotte comments that “the most thing I like is the little kids, because they’re so sweet and lovable.” For mothers currently raising their children, conversely, matricentricity means that within the Mothers’ Centre children are not only accepted but cherished by the group, enabling their mothers to participate without guilt or concerns. Mothers routinely engage with children that are not their own, and babies are passed around to be fawned over by all. Most of my mornings in the drop-in centre began with little hands tugging me over to the play area for a game of Chutes and Ladders or to read a book. The presence of children and those who love them contributes to the positive, welcoming, and nurturing environment of the Sewing Circle and supports the development of positive, empowered mother identities by revaluing the tasks of mothering.

Children also benefit from this environment. Mothers appreciate the opportunity for their children to spend time with a diverse group of peers in a positive environment, as Claire describes: “they have more chances to play with other kids as well...my son has school but he sees them every day, so meeting new people I think helps him, and helps him burn off some energy, too.” Claire also sees childcare during the Sewing Circle as an opportunity to socialize her infant daughter, reducing her separation anxiety: “it’s starting to get her used to being more independent, ‘cause she is with me twenty-four-seven. Start introducing her to new things will help her in the long run.” For her older daughter, Celia notes that participating in the Sewing Circle is an opportunity to “interact with adults and not just kids all the time.” In addition to socialization, playing with other children is an outlet for children’s excess energy, easing the tasks of mothering and improving mothers’ relationships with their children. Claire notes that her children are “more relaxed and calm because they’re able to run off their energy and play with

other kids,” while Celia appreciates that “[Taylor] and I can hang out for that couple of hours and...be stressed but deal with it in a positive way.”

The Sewing Circle offers a variety of activities for children while their mothers sew, from toys to computer games to crafts. This range of activities ensures that mothers with both small and older children feel welcome and comfortable to leave their children in childcare. As Katie describes:

Each of my boys has a different thing that they like. The oldest one likes computers, right? And then the middle one, the second oldest one, likes to do the computers, plus he likes doing the crafts...and then the youngest one is into the toys and he likes the crafts. So they just really enjoy the time they spend here.

In particular, craft instruction, led by a volunteer, is named as a valuable component of the childcare that the Sewing Circle offers. Similar to the benefits of learning to sew, children’s crafts are described as a source of pride, as Katie reports: “When [David] comes and does those projects with them...once I see them they’re like ‘look what I made mom!’ like, just excited.”

David also notes that for children, art is a source of self-expression, affirmation, and a sense of accomplishment. For mothers with shy and very small infants, however, the childcare the Sewing Circle can provide is often inadequate, and these mothers must bring their babies into the sewing room, where a mother cooing over an infant in a stroller while she works on a quilt, or nursing a baby between seams is a common sight. Knowing that their children are accepted, occupied, and provided for in the Sewing Circle enables mothers to participate fully without guilt, allowing them to take time for themselves as individuals.

Because the “enfolded activity” of raising young children is highly demanding, necessitating the performance of many tasks at once (Francis-Connolly 2000:284), this opportunity for “time to oneself” is named frequently as a major benefit of the Sewing Circle. Katie appreciates “being able to get my own time to myself to do the projects, and knowing that my kids are being, like,

just right outside the door and being able to be taken care of where I'm able to spend some time by myself to do some stuff, right? Well, not technically by myself but without my kids right there." The proximity of their children reduces separation anxiety for both mothers and their children: "they're so attached to me that they always have to come run in, check up on me, and be making sure that...I can be found." In order for mothers to participate in a craft, their mother and craftworker identities must be compatible. Knowing that their children are safe, nearby, and looked after frees mothers to pursue skills and personal interests. The matricentric environment of the Sewing Circle, from its family-like atmosphere to the napping babies in the sewing room, therefore is an important element of the Sewing Circle's empowerment potential. Their children cared for, mothers have the opportunity to interact with other adults, build community, and develop skills and their own interests.

5.1.2 Establishing Common Ground

Furthermore, along with the mother-centric mandate of the Mothers' Centre, a common interest creates a basis for relationships and therefore is conducive to the development of lasting, supportive friendships within a diverse group. Although, as O'Connor argues, friendships "tend to be between those who are similar in social class, race, marital status, maternal status, and participation in paid employment" (1998:127), limiting friendships to those who are socially similar, "if interaction mainly revolves around shared interests...then it is arguable that similarity in this area is likely to be key" (1998:128). A common interest in sewing may foster intercultural, intergenerational, and inter-class relationships, promoting the formation of social networks based on mutual respect and interest rather than convenience. These friendships also support the solidarity that can lead to group empowerment. Although friendship tends to be considered an apolitical relationship between socially equivalent peers, Whitaker argues that it is more productive to consider friendship as an "equalizing relationship" (2011:64), through which

friends are made into “equal partners in a common world” (2011:61). This means that, “as an *equalizing* relationship that requires knowing another in their own right, friendship challenges assumptions that difference need be a barrier to political community” (2011:64). As Katie comments, “sewing is like, for everybody,” and creates common ground between socially distinct groups, the first step toward producing communities based on respect and solidarity.

The location of the Mothers’ Centre and its emphasis on the development of a skill with wide appeal means that it has the result of minimizing intercultural and interclass barriers, providing a space in which groups can meet, interact, and bond. In Foss’s model of sewing as a ritual, the sewing room acts as a liminal space in which “all women...are accorded immanent value based on their shared interest in sewing” (1996:64). In this environment, differences are secondary to a “fun-filled, creative atmosphere,” encouraging the development of friendships based on shared interests and new experiences but also contributing to interpersonal understanding. Participants described the insight gained from sharing stories with women from different walks of life: as Celia remarks, “It’s kind of nice to learn...other people’s lives and stuff too, right? ‘Cause I’m a very judgmental person, so it’s been nice coming here and knowing the other stories from the ladies.” The opportunity to share stories helps Celia to feel a sense of solidarity with other women in the community. Margaret notes the role the Sewing Circle plays in “breaking a cultural barrier,” while a focus group participant remarks that “the kids from all backgrounds play together,” potentially fostering community in the future. Learning together is seen as a way to bridge gaps between groups, as one focus group participant remarks: “It’s great for different cultures to come together and learn.”

Recognizing these similarities does more than serve as a bonding tool. According to Madriz, “the discovery that other women face similar problems or share analogous ideas is an important

tool in breaking distances and in women's realization that their opinions are legitimate and valid" (1998:117), providing access to a kind of "power-with" (Rowlands 1997) that can strengthen participants beyond an individual level. As Janet points out, in the larger community:

We just seem to see the differences, we don't see the similarities, and that's what you see when you go there....You know, you kind of crab about this little thing...but you're not crabbing about 'all of us,' you know? There's no real sense of how big the barriers are....Like, mothers will see themselves in different categories...[but] it's good to educate women, that you're all women....First you have to know what you're not getting, and then you can really understand that it's as a group, and it's when you start to work together that you're going to get what you need.

According to Janet, the opportunity to associate with other social groups creates a sense of solidarity and similarity, helping women to find common goals and issues that can be addressed as a group. Because "community is the first step toward collective action" (Hewett 2006:47), finding this common ground is crucial to the development and acceptance of more empowered mother subjectivities. Given the colonial history of Saskatoon, its modern legacy of institutionalized and everyday racism, and its current division into economically and ethnically distinct areas, the development of common ground through an emphasis on sewing and motherhood is an important step toward solidarity and to empowering women as a diverse group.

5.1.3 Safety

Finally, the Mothers' Centre supports the development of community by providing a space which is seen as physically, socially, and emotionally "safe." Physically, the space of the Mothers' Centre provides women, particularly those living within the notoriously hazardous core neighborhoods of Saskatoon, with "somewhere to go." Prior to the opening of the Mothers' Centre, spaces seen as safe for women were not available in the core neighborhoods. One focus group participant notes that the Mothers' Centre is "the best thing ever to happen to this area" while another appreciates that "now we have a respectable place to go."

This sense of physical safety removes some of the fears that act as a barrier standing in the way of women's empowerment. The safety of the Mothers' Centre creates peace of mind for participants' family members, with one focus group participant stating that "my husband likes that I have somewhere safe to go," while the safe childcare provided during the Sewing Circle allows mothers to relax. Katie explains:

You've got to take care of your surroundings...Like with the Mothers' Centre, I know my kids are, I'm okay with leaving them with [Grace] because I know she's taking care of them, right? Otherwise, normally I wouldn't, don't leave my kids with just anybody. In here, like, I feel okay because I know they're just down the hallway from me and I know that [Grace's] taking care of them...I know my kids are not going to get hurt, right? 'Cause they're being watched, plus the safety of the Mothers' Centre, how it's set up.

For Katie, the safety of her children is a deciding factor in her decision to attend the Sewing Circle. In this way, a sense of safety creates new opportunities, allowing women to feel confident in their choices and thereby to act with more agency. Katie's mother, Elise, for instance, notes that "there's a lot of abused women that won't go do stuff but if they knew that it's safe...they might try new stuff."

In addition to physical safety, however, the Mothers' Centre also attempts to offer a sense of "emotional safety." Betty J. Barrett, discussing the concept of safety as it relates to education, defines a safe space as a "metaphorical space in which students are sufficiently comfortable to take social and psychological risks by expressing their individuality" (2010:3). Ideally, this should allow all individuals to participate and speak their minds equally, lessening the effects of social marginalization. However, the idea that a space can be made "safe," and equally safe for everyone, is problematic. In an educational setting, "the social norms, structures, and processes that differentially confer power and privilege upon individuals based on their social position outside the classroom also operate within the classroom" (2010:7), a statement which applies equally to the socially and economically diverse group attending the Sewing Circle. In addition,

the presumption of safety is not only naïve, but often harmful. The promise of absolute comfort discourages critical discussion and reflection, and often reinforces the marginalized position of some individuals within the group by ensuring the willingness of more privileged others to speak their minds (Barrett 2010). Furthermore, because the concept of “safety” emphasizes internal psychological states, its effects and presence are invisible and can never be confirmed. Assuming the safety of a space may instead conceal conflicts, discomforts, and disadvantages being incurred on its more vulnerable members.

Instead of “safety,” therefore, Barrett offers the concept of classroom “civility,” which addresses interpersonal behaviors rather than internal psychological states and carries “a primary focus on student behavior, citizenship, and responsibility, rather than a focus on student comfort” (2010:10). Although the Mothers’ Centre emphasizes “safety,” it instead actively promotes civility. The Mothers’ Centre does not assume that prejudices, differences, and conflicts are left behind at the door but instead supports the maintenance of a respectful community through the occasional conflict intervention of hosts and volunteers. During one Sewing Circle session, for example, a loud argument erupted over sewing space. The two women involved each complained of feeling disrespected, and were pulled aside by Mothers’ Centre hosts to resolve the problem. When they returned to the sewing room, other members of the Sewing Circle stepped in to help, offering each woman space to sew on opposite sides of the room.

This conflict, while apparently lessening the welcoming nature of the Mothers’ Centre, might actually indicate a greater but dynamic comfort within the group. At an organizing meeting the next day, to my surprise, the Mothers’ Centre coordinator actually appeared pleased to hear about the conflict. She explained that prior to attending the Sewing Circle, the younger of these women, Olivia, had been shy and reserved, and would not have stood up for herself in this

manner. Although conflict may be expected to weaken the sense of community, Whitaker explains that “friendship involves a relational ethics, not an ethics of absolute principles” (2011:64). As Zulaika argues, “friendships can accommodate growth and are able to confront ambivalences and ambiguities” (2005:285). Friendships and communities are dynamic and although they always contain conflict, this conflict does not necessarily threaten social ties. In fact, Whitaker argues that the potential of friendship as a conduit to political engagement, organization, and solidarity “hinges on challenging the idea that friendship expresses apolitical identity. Rather, its ground lies between friends who are, by implication, separate” (2011:65). Indeed, “civility” does not necessitate friendship, and can even be established between community members with a history of conflict and enmity, with potential benefits. As Aretxaga argues, “it is, precisely, the awareness of belonging to the same community and feeling free not to be ‘friends’ with someone that, in my view, makes genuine dialogue about political differences possible” (2005:176). Rather than assuming the uniformity of participants or their perfect comfort, the Mothers’ Centre provides a space in which a diverse group can meet for respectful interaction, building a dynamic community.

The results of this proactive approach are apparent in participants’ descriptions of the Mothers’ Centre. It is described as “open” and “inviting,” in contrast to the general perception of the core neighborhoods as dangerous or depressing. As Claire notes, “it’s just such a happy place, cause, you know, life can be so depressing sometimes...with everything that you see, like with alcoholism and everything like that, drugs. It’s something positive to go to where you can forget everything.” According to Claire, women

are really struggling in this neighborhood particularly, because they feel like they have nowhere to go and to talk to people...I tell everyone that they can come here and, especially if they’re having troubles at home, that there’s women here who have been through that as well and to come talk to us.

Participants describe the Mothers' Centre as a positive space filled with respectful people, as

Katie states:

The environment is good. The people are really good. If I felt something wasn't right, I wouldn't be coming to the Mothers' Centre...if I had a problem with somebody in there, then I wouldn't feel comfortable to be here....there's nobody there that's really, like, negative...or really pushy or nobody's there to take your stuff that you're using...they have respect for each other, everybody.

This environment of respect is vital to Katie's decision to frequent the Mothers' Centre.

Furthermore, the Mothers' Centre is seen as a refuge from struggles and conflicts at home, a space in which participants can "take a break from the crazy and the worry." Margaret reports hearing from one participant that the Sewing Circle functioned as an escape from abusive family members, while Charlotte describes the Mothers' Centre as a refuge from conflicts with her neighbors and family: "I don't want to stay down in my place right now, eh? I don't want to put up with it....that's the only way to get away from other people when they argue with you and I don't like that. So I just go somewhere else, cause that's the only way." To these women, the Mothers' Centre can be considered an emotional and physical refuge, in which outside conflicts can be temporarily escaped in favor of a "respectful" and "welcoming" group of friends.

The positive environment of the Sewing Circle offers many benefits for participants. It provides peace of mind for women and their families and a relaxing space away from conflicts and challenges at home. Furthermore, a sense of safety enables women to feel comfortable trying new things, allowing them to develop new ways of acting and perceiving themselves and supporting the development of empowered subjectivities. Such a space creates an atmosphere conducive to social bonding – first as friendships, and then developing into a supportive community.

5.2 The Sewing Circle as a Community of Practice

The Sewing Circle may be understood as what Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) refer to as a community of practice, a group of people who share a common interest or interests and interact regularly in order to increase their understanding of the topic. These communities act as a living bank of knowledge, sharing largely tacit information through social interaction such as discourse, storytelling, coaching, and demonstrations (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002). In such communities, individuals seek and share advice, talk about their experiences and problems, and discuss their dreams and aspirations. Through this interaction, individuals do more than share knowledge about their common interests. Instead, having a group who shares similar perspectives and interests creates a sense of belonging, contributing to individuals' social well-being.

5.2.1 Sense of Community

Within the Sewing Circle, a sense of community is evident. As Tracy notes,

We have this nice core group of women that are really excited to come out each week and learn new skills, but I think really like to be able to come out and talk with each other and sit and just be part of something, because I think a lot of them aren't part of anything bigger than, you know...their household or their families. So I think it's nice for them to be something separate and it's just theirs.

Being a part of something that is "just theirs" gives women an opportunity to engage with others as individuals. Because mothers' well-being depends on their ability to fulfill both their roles as mothers and as productive, autonomous individuals, the opportunity to engage in a program and community "for themselves" without jeopardizing their responsibilities and priorities as mothers enables women to nurture both elements of their identity. Helina comments that "if you do something for yourself you will feel happy and excited," while a focus group participant notes that "I love being a part of something...it gives me something to look forward to." Participants note their appreciation of the opportunity to make new friends and meet with old friends, with

one focus group participant describing the Sewing Circle as “a great opportunity to come together.” This is particularly valuable to newcomers to Canada, who enjoy the opportunity to start reestablishing a network of friends while learning about Canada and its people, and for those who are otherwise socially isolated. Helina states that she attends the Sewing Circle “to be with a new community, and learn their culture, and that is a great thing for me because if you live in one country you have to learn about those communities, about that country....I’m just really new for this country.” Later, she concludes that “I made a new community....When I meet this community and we do crafts and sew, when I participate in this program I’m really happy.” Katie, a single mother, notes that “I’m a very quiet person. I don’t go out and, like, interact with too many people...I guess this is the only place I interact with a lot of people, eh?” Similarly, Janet, whose children and grandchildren live far away, explains, “despite all the people that are in my life, I live alone. So I go there and there’s a group that I’m in, that I’m convening with.” This community, constructed around the common ground of sewing and motherhood, creates a sense of belonging and of being cared for by others, culminating in a sense of social support which is named by both the participants and Izquierdo (2009) as an important component of well-being.

5.2.2 Social Support

Because one’s social network influences their self-perception, social networks have the capacity to both empower and disempower the individuals they encompass. This fact is particularly relevant to women, “whose idea of themselves is typically rooted in social relationships (O’Connor 1998:118), with implications for their well-being. According to Balaji and colleagues (2007), large, supportive social networks tend to correlate with lower levels of stress and a greater sense of self-efficacy, while smaller networks are associated with depression. For parents, whose work “involves a number of mental health costs, including time, physical and

emotional energy, conflicts with other social roles, and the economic burden of childrearing” (2007:1388), the support provided through positive social networks can help offset the challenges of parenting. Supportive social networks can help parents to cope with stressful life events, use adaptive parenting behaviors, adopt nurturing parenting styles, and implement health-promoting behaviors through the provision of information and tangible support (Balaji et al. 2007). Similarly, Marshall and colleagues (2001) report that strong emotional and social support systems give parents a sense of self-efficacy and competence, resulting in warmer and more responsive behavior toward their children. In turn, their children tend to demonstrate greater levels of social competence, lower levels of depression, and fewer behavioral problems than children whose parents do not receive this level of support. These benefits are especially pronounced in varied social networks in which children have the opportunity to interact with adults, providing greater cognitive stimulation. These networks therefore promote the well-being of both parents and their children.

However, not all social networks can be considered positive or supportive, potentially resulting in a more negative self-image, increased stress, and poorer mental and physical health. According to Balaji and colleagues, the negative impacts of an individual’s social network “are particularly salient for low-income women, who are more likely to have people in their network who have high levels of stress while concurrently possessing the fewest resources with which to respond to these challenges” (2007:1388). While supportive social networks have the capacity to empower the individual, negative, stressful, or demanding social networks may instead place additional demands on them, limiting their agency. For women, and particularly those already marginalized by their ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic status, negative social networks may prove to be an additional and unwelcome burden. However, these women may also be those with

the most to gain, and supporting their access to positive, supportive social networks may be a way to empower them in taking control of their lives. The Sewing Circle supports the development of positive social networks, providing an opportunity to engage with and learn from other women and thereby supporting women's well-being.

Women as a Source of Well-Being

The demands of idealized motherhood are virtually impossible to meet, rendering every mother subpar, and therefore “mothers, rightly fearing criticism, disapproval, and censor, mask the truths of their maternal experiences” (O'Reilly 2013:199). In fear of being seen as “bad mothers,” women often keep silent, reinforcing their feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and guilt. However, according to Maidment and Macfarlane (2009), the chance to share feelings, beliefs, and concerns with other women can normalize these experiences and contribute to the development of a positive sense of self. Several Sewing Circle participants described their lives, spent largely with only men or children, as isolated, while the opportunity to interact with other women was named as a source of well-being. For these women, the Sewing Circle represents “a great opportunity to leave the husband for a night” that “draws [them] to get to know the ladies.” Friendships between women “can validate those identities which are required of women but not valued by the wider culture (e.g., motherhood, housewifery)” (O'Connor 1998:121), and “can provide women with a status of power within the world of women which is denied to them within a predominantly male public arena” (1998:120). Far from being “only affective,” within these groups women learn their true value and potential through sharing feelings, caring for one another, and helping each other in a matricentric environment.

Someone to Talk To

The Sewing Circle provides a comfortable space in which women can discuss their feelings and problems for advice or catharsis. Mothers who are currently raising their children appreciate

the opportunity to learn parenting skills and seek advice from other mothers, and a diverse range of women, from grandmothers to new mothers, provides a diversity of perspectives and an immense archive of experiential knowledge. Celia appreciates “learning from the other moms, ‘cause there’s more than one way of doing stuff, right?” while Claire comments that new mothers “can come here and experience what children are like.” Olivia notes that “they’ve been really supportive about things...they know information about stuff like if you’re in a crisis...they know where there’s services you can go to.” This exchange of knowledge and information helps participants to manage challenges and problems in their lives. In addition, however, when faced with conflicts, crises, or other difficult life circumstances, participants also note the importance of simply having “somebody to talk to when you’re feeling down.” Talking to others is described as reducing stress and other negative feelings, helping participants to cope with difficult situations. For instance, Charlotte remarks that after a conflict with her daughter, “I was just so stressed, eh? I just didn’t know what to do. So I had to talk to somebody.” As Claire notes,

It’s really gotten me to open up about like my past and everything, and things that I’m going through. And I can talk to them about what I’m going through and they can talk to me, and it feels like we’re open with each other and that helps us both. ‘Cause if you bottle everything up it’s just going to cause more problems.

In addition to managing her own problems, Claire sees talking with others as a two-way exchange, beneficial to both the speaker and the listener. Listening to others’ problems gives participants a sense of usefulness and purpose, contributing to a positive sense of self. As Claire continues: “I’ve helped quite a few women. I tell them if you need to talk, just come talk to me, and they have done that. I feel like I’ve actually done something to help somebody. I just love that. ‘Cause I know what it’s like to struggle myself.” The opportunity to use her negative past experiences to help others gives Claire a sense of accomplishment.

Furthermore, in addition to releasing their negative feelings, participants enjoy sharing happy news and reveling in one another's successes. For self-declared "shy" Patricia, a First Nations grandmother, listening to others is itself a major appeal of the Sewing Circle, as she enjoys "hearing ideas from other ladies when they're talking about their plans...I just like listening to their conversation, just sitting back." Participants note the joy of seeing each other's finished projects, and of "knowing that there's lots of positive things that moms are doing with their kids." When one participant had a new baby boy, she missed one Sewing Circle session (on the day of his birth) but returned the very next week, proudly passing the child around the group. The opportunity to share both good times and bad with others helps participants both to manage their problems and to validate and take pride in their accomplishments, and maintains the positive environment of the Sewing Circle.

A Sense of Belonging

The interest and concern of others also gives participants a sense of being cared for, contributing to their sense of belonging. For Janet, the sense that "somebody's looking out for you" results in a greater sense of well-being, a sentiment frequently repeated by participants. Charlotte enjoys the care and concern of others, stating, "I like it when people ask 'how are you doing?' I said, 'I'm okay.' 'Cause they care, eh? People, they're loving." Janet describes the nurturing environment of the Sewing Circle:

I was shocked the first time I walked in and there's nobody sewing but people are sitting there eating and I was like, 'where's the Sewing Circle?' And then, you know, we just sit down and have a meal together and I think that's just so nurturing like, walk in the doors and somebody's taking care of you, you know, they're taking care of each other.

For Janet, sharing a meal with others is a nurturing experience, strengthening the sense of community in the group and contributing to women's well-being.

Alternatives to Negative Social Networks

In addition to improving women's sense of belonging, the social support offered by the Sewing Circle can also promote women's well-being by providing alternatives to negative sources of support, such as unhealthy relationships. Olivia, who recently abandoned a number of friendships she considered unhealthy, appreciates the opportunity to associate with positive influences by "meeting new people, people who want to do something with their life and enjoy different things." Being able to engage in healthy activities with "different people who are healthy and who encourage and support me" is, for Olivia, a source of well-being and a deterrent from bad habits. Furthermore, Katie remarks that support, such as that offered by the Mothers' Centre, is vital for women to be able to act with agency. She explains that after conflict with an abusive significant other:

I just said you know, I'm done. I can't do this no more...so I was single for a long time...My mom came down and, like, she came down and stayed with me for a long time! People need that support system of having somebody there that will always be with them...they need someone to be there for them, the women, to know that they're not going to be left alone once they take that step to leave...if they don't have that support system, where are they going to go? They're going to go right back to that same relationship, right?

The ability to act independently, such as by leaving unhealthy relationships, requires the support of others who validate women's actions and instill them with confidence. Support can come from dependent relationships, or from positive sources, and providing positive social support can promote women's ability to act on their own needs.

5.2.3 "Everybody Helps"

In addition to social support, the Sewing Circle also provides women with the opportunity to cooperate with others, exercising their talents, industry, and creativity amongst a supportive group. The chance to demonstrate and share skills is named by many participants, who note their love of helping and being helped by others, as a source of affirmation, appreciation, and a sense

of purpose. While early on in the Sewing Circle participants usually asked the instructor for help, as time went on and they grew more confident in their skills, they began to exchange tips and advice with others in the group, a dynamic with benefits for all involved. Because a major advantage of communities of practice is the exchange of embodied knowledge (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), sharing information among these groups simultaneously strengthens the community and enhances the knowledge and abilities of the individuals within it far beyond what would be possible in a less social learning environment.

First, being able to ask one another for advice helps participants to learn more quickly and easily. As Celia remarks, “people explain stuff differently, so it’s good to know that if I don’t understand something, if I’m asking you and I don’t quite understand it then I can go to somebody else and ask them.” Similarly, Janet comments that “everybody helps, I mean, you start out as a volunteer but then you’re sewing, and some other woman’s coming along to remind you about something.” One focus group participant started the program late, and relied on the help of other participants to learn to use the sewing machine. The exchange of information and advice between participants helps the program to run smoothly and increases the sense of community within the group (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002).

For other participants, however, the opportunity to help others is a favorite part of participating in the Sewing Circle. Katie describes enjoying “interacting with all the women, like being able to help each other out...if someone has a problem with how to do something, helping them. Like, sometimes I don’t end up doing anything of my own projects, just helping out.” After her own struggles early on in the learning process, she enjoys “helping other people to go through that.” Similarly, Patricia states that “if they ask me to do something, I will do it...I would like to help out, you know, bring out the sewing machines for somebody...I like doing

that.” Charlotte indicates a desire to “teach people other crafts,” suggesting not only a desire to help but also a desire to expand and use her other skills. Tracy explains the appeal of teaching:

it hones my own skills, but it also just makes me feel, I don’t know, I guess feel useful? The different role where you’re helping and people really appreciate the help that they get from you, so I really enjoy that.

Sharing skills with others creates a sense of appreciation and purpose while enhancing the teacher’s own skill set and strengthening the community of practice. Furthermore, learning skills and teaching these skills to others may also be considered an altered performance which sculpts more empowered identities. In the environment of the Sewing Circle, participants become cognizant of their ability to influence others. A sense of usefulness and appreciation does more than enhance the self-esteem of the sewer; it also confirms her ability to have an impact on her social environment, increasing her sense of her ability to act within that environment and her confidence to do so.

In Janet’s terms, “women coming together” and working in a cooperative environment also creates the opportunity for industriousness on more female-centric terms. While eventually many participants hope for the Sewing Circle to evolve into a cooperative which will “start to generate an income in a way that supports women who have children,” even prior to this economic pursuit the community of practice encouraged by the Sewing Circle supports women’s empowerment. Women coming together and bonding over a common interest such as sewing creates an opportunity to identify other similarities – including similar issues and problems and determining how to address them. Within the group atmosphere, Janet notes, common needs are identified, individual skills emerge, and problems are addressed in a way that uses and values the skills and talents of each woman. Furthermore, these women’s needs are supported, their feelings acknowledged, and their decisions validated, allowing them to see themselves as more capable.

5.3 Social Networks and Well-being

The social network of the Mothers' Centre supports women's well-being in two major ways. First, it supports several components of well-being named by participants. The Sewing Circle provides safe spaces and a positive social environment. The provision of childcare allows women to nurture themselves as individuals, while also ensuring that children are happy, healthy, and safe. Each of these elements was named by participants as essential to a sense of well-being.

However, the Sewing Circle also contributes to women's well-being by supporting the development of positive subjectivities, allowing women to see themselves as more completely fulfilling their roles and potentials. Within the social network of the Sewing Circle, participants become freer to act in a way that supports them as women and as mothers, empowering them and contributing to their agency and well-being. Through the matricentricity of the Sewing Circle, women's work as mothers throughout the lifecourse is validated and valued, helping them to see their work as important. Because they see these tasks as important and valuable, women feel more able and willing to act upon them, supporting them to perform more empowered mother subjectivities. Furthermore, the Sewing Circle also supports mother's individual identities by allowing them to act with more agency and independence without jeopardizing their identities as mothers. The safety of the Mothers' Centre, the provision of safe, positive childcare, and the development of supportive social networks validate their perspectives and remove barriers to empowerment such as fear, role conflicts, and a lack of support. The social network of the Sewing Circle therefore enables women to act with more agency in their daily lives, supporting positive identities and a sense of well-being.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

The Saskatoon Mothers' Centre Sewing Circle provides participants with a physically and emotionally comfortable space, centred on the needs of women and their children. In this environment, women are able to engage in "equalizing" relationships with a diverse group of others, access social support, and give and receive help, creating a supportive community of practice in which knowledge is shared and validated. This community, based on sewing, also enables women to overcome limitations to gain an understanding of their own potential and abilities, achieve a sense of self-sufficiency, and maintain a sense of productivity which promotes a positive state of mind and protects their identity as mothers while allowing them to engage in an activity for themselves. Furthermore, sewing also allows women to negotiate their position in their social environment. Through the creativity and skill of sewing, participants are able to negotiate and express identity, navigate class status by stretching budgets and accessing otherwise unattainable goods, and claim their cultural heritage by producing and accessing traditional crafts and clothing.

Given participants' understandings of well-being and the challenges they face, the opportunity to engage in sewing and a community has the potential to help address many of the needs of women in Saskatoon's core neighborhoods. As an activity for adult women provided free of charge, the Sewing Circle is one step toward providing for Saskatoon's underserved "just moms." For impoverished mothers, the Sewing Circle protects their identities both as caring and adequate mothers and as productive members of society. The opportunity to produce and give "gifts of time and love," such as Charlotte's pyjamas for her granddaughters, is one way for mothers to demonstrate their love for their children and families, thereby providing "extras" without straining their budgets. For unemployed mothers, sewing provides a sense of

productivity and increases women's sense of self-sufficiency, giving them confidence in their ability to mend clothing, alter clothing for growing children, and produce products for utilitarian use in their daily life. In addition, lone mothers are able to take time for themselves while their children are cared for in a loving environment. They are also able to access social support, which Wilson argues is particularly important as "communities and families are now organized so that young parents, mothers, and grandmothers no longer live closely together" (2004:15). Within the Sewing Circle, participants share childcare tasks, seek advice and resources, and receive support, potentially reducing their stress and allowing them to grow more confident as mothers.

Furthermore, the Sewing Circle welcomes all mothers, including grandmothers who may or may not be caring for their grandchildren. These women receive the same care and support as other mothers, which is particularly important given the general devaluation of caregiving grandparents and the elderly in Canada (Rodgers and Jones 1999; Fuller-Thompson 2005). For grandparents who live away from their children and grandchildren, the Sewing Circle provides an opportunity to engage with young mothers and children, and to receive the care of a multigenerational environment. Finally, each of these groups note the impact of isolation. The welcoming, non-judgmental, and matricentric Sewing Circle provides women with social support and a sense of belonging.

When asked about their understandings of the concept of well-being, participants stress the importance of emotional well-being, noting the necessity of safe spaces, a positive social environment, and caring for themselves. The Sewing Circle provides a sense of belonging and of being cared for through nurturing food and the loving concern of others. It represents an opportunity to relax by engaging in a calming activity and to reduce stress by talking and empathizing with others. The support of other mothers validates women's decisions and allows

them to feel more confident in their abilities. Participating in the Sewing Circle is also an opportunity for mothers to take time for themselves in a mother-friendly way. Their children safe and entertained, mothers are free to engage in sewing, which loses the “trivial” status of other hobbies through its maternal connotations and its end results.

In addition to addressing these concerns, however, the Sewing Circle has the potential to support more empowered mother subjectivities. According to the concept of performativity, subjectivity emerges through repeated actions (Butler 1990). These actions are shaped by the cultural environment, and in this way cultural values limit the actions and potential of individuals, thereby shaping their subjectivities. Women’s bodies are governed to naturalize ideal motherhood, and this ideology, based in the materiality of the body and cultural beliefs about what it can and should do, shapes the individual’s self-knowledge (Foucault 1982).

According to Juliet Mitchell, “the status of woman is held in the heart and the head as well as in the home...to maintain itself so efficiently it courses through the mental and emotional bloodstream” (Parker 2010:3), and “empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructions, so that people come to see themselves as having the capacity and right to act” (Rowlands 1997:14). However, although one’s actions exist within structural limitations, within these limitations there is some capacity for these actions to be altered. If the “truths” that individuals in a society believe about themselves are reified through action, learning to perform differently can subvert the meanings and restrictions placed on them. This has the potential to support the development of Chandler’s (1998) “motherselfhoods,” which extend the concept of the mother to include multiple roles, strategies, and identities, subverting the oppressive dictates of the institution of motherhood to reclaim more empowering “mothering.”

The supportive social network promoted by the Sewing Circle is a space in which these motherselfhoods can emerge. Within this matricentric space, mothers' needs are met, their desires and values acknowledged, and the conflicts between their multiple roles begin to disappear, allowing mothering to be empowering rather than oppressive. First, a respectful and non-judgmental space increases women's willingness to open up to others and try new things, allowing them to speak and behave with more freedom. The opportunity to help and be helped by others does more than strengthen the bonds between members of the group. It also gives participants a sense of competence, validation, and appreciation. Through helping one another, women's abilities are put to the test, legitimizing them, and they are able to demonstrate their abilities to others. Their competence is reflected back to them through the appreciation, admiration, and development of others. Finally, the diversity of the group within an "equalizing environment" suggests that the Sewing Circle also has the potential to act as a form of "consciousness raising," increasing solidarity between women and helping them to identify common problems and solutions. The potential result of this is a woman-centric space set apart from many of the structures that define and limit women in their outside world, allowing them to act in ways that are legitimized.

As Andrea O'Reilly (2013) argues, the empowering potential of Mothers' Centres lies in their promise of security, community, and validation, in which women bond, speak their truths, and receive acknowledgement and validation for their choices and actions. However, the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre provides more than this support, also allowing women to also develop a new skill. Because "the self is constituted out of visceral processes as much as expressed through them," and all experience is the result of a "symbolizing physiology" (Kleinman 1995:118), individual's actions construct their subjectivities, and learning to act differently is a way of

learning to perceive oneself differently. Sewing is one such way of learning to use the body differently, with the potential result of placing value back into the marginalized female body in order to reshape mother subjectivities. The production of a craft object creates a material marker of the subject, her identity, and her abilities. It exists in the outside world, demonstrating her ability to alter and impact her environment.

These new ways of acting are made intelligible through the productivity and matricentricity of the Sewing Circle. The Sewing Circle is mother-friendly, and mothers' children are supported and cherished while they work, creating useful and meaningful products that support, rather than detract from, their self-perception as good mothers. These characteristics place sewing firmly in the domain of acceptable mother behavior, while simultaneously enhancing the participant's sense of self-sufficiency and her ability to overcome personal limitations. The ability to perform more household tasks, such as mending, hemming, and replacing buttons creates an increased sense of competence and autonomy. In addition, overcoming limits gives participants a sense of their own potential and abilities, encouraging them to push themselves farther. Participants in the Sewing Circle note a desire for more challenges, new projects, and other crafts such as knitting, suggesting that learning to sew has inspired and motivated them to push their abilities even farther.

Furthermore, learning to sew also allows participants to actively negotiate and express their identities, influencing how they will be seen by others and the values and meanings their clothing will project. Over time, producing these items incorporates their meanings into the sewer, affecting her self-perceptions (Prentice 2008). Sewing can be used to reflect personal style and preferences outside of the bounds of ready-made clothing and household items. The fit, color, style, and decoration of these products are expressions of the producer's ingenuity, skill, and

personal preference, giving the sewer greater freedom to project the image she wants with her clothing and other items. For some women, this is a chance to dress in alignment with and project cultural values outside of the mainstream society. Helina's African dresses allow her to dress in a way that is comfortable and projects her cultural background, while the production of jingle skirts and star blankets allows Aboriginal participants to construct and display objects which connect them to their heritage and help them to more fully participate in cultural practices today. Sewing can be used to project a higher-class image by accessing products otherwise outside of the budget, such as Olivia's formal gown. It can negotiate social relationships, using gifts to engage with others in the social environment, such as Helina's apron for her teacher. Finally, through saving money sewing can extend one's budget, enabling them to live more easily and comfortably without increasing income. Margot and Christine's shawls, one produced for survival and the other as an "extra" to ease a student budget, demonstrate how sewing can help to ease financial burdens. Within the confines of a low income, sewing allows women to carve out "wiggle room," enabling them to live more closely to the way they want. This small amount of freedom creates choice and agency, increasing their options, however slightly, for living an attractive and viable life.

While all Mothers' Centres should be able to offer the security, community, and validation benefits described by O'Reilly (2013), the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre's Sewing Circle program increases its empowering potential dramatically. In addition to the empowerment benefits of sewing, the Sewing Circle plays a role in drawing women to the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre. The opportunity to learn a skill is a major appeal of the Sewing Circle, while its productivity justifies the leisure time to ensure that time spent at the Mothers' Centre is not seen as trivial. In addition, sewing has a leveling effect on the participants of the Sewing Circle. It creates a common

interest over which bonding can occur, creating common ground in addition to motherhood. Such commonality is particularly important because the group of participants in the Sewing Circle is mixed socially and economically, creating issues of power that can hinder the development of friendships. These issues emerged in my focus groups, in which, as predicted by Kratz (2010), willingness to participate correlated with the participant's education and social marginalization. However, sewing serves, in Janet's words, to "level the playing field." Although some participants had previous sewing experience, not one reported confidence in sewing prior to attending the Sewing Circle. Because all of the participants considered themselves to be beginners, their common level of sewing skill served as an "equalizing" factor, contributing to their sense of similarity. Unlike in my focus groups, in which an "academic" setting inadvertently emphasized the power dynamics within the group, in the Sewing Circle these power dynamics are minimized, allowing a diverse group of women to participate freely and fully, sharing experiences and information and encouraging the development of a community. While the drop-in centre is invaluable for its resources and the ready provision of social support, the Sewing Circle increases the Mothers' Centre's community-building potential while the opportunity for skill development improves women's ability to perform empowered subjectivities.

Women in Saskatoon's core neighborhoods face a variety of life circumstances which serve as barriers to role fulfillment, reducing their sense of adequacy and therefore well-being. This research demonstrates the way in which informal skill development programming like the Sewing Circle can contribute to improving these circumstances, through the development of both supportive social environments and more empowered mother subjectivities. Understanding "well-being" holistically, with the fulfillment of culturally and personally valued roles at its

heart, this project proposes a link between skill-development and well-being using the concept of performativity, demonstrating the potential of skill development to improve well-being by nurturing women's identities as capable and effective mothers and members of society. This research may therefore inform the future development of grassroots skill development programming, encouraging projects targeted at marginalized mothers to include a more holistic understanding of well-being, and increasing this programming's ability to empower women from the ground up.

Future research should examine the importance of productivity to the mother identity, including the extent to which mothers consider their motherwork to be productive labor and the importance they place on a sense of productivity. An examination of the impact of "productive leisure," in contrast with paid labor, on women's sense of themselves as productive members of society would also help to elucidate the potential of craft programming on the production of a positive sense of self. In addition, longer-term studies examining the impact of "mastering" a craft and of entrepreneurship on well-being would demonstrate the long-term empowering potential of skill development.

As embroidery artist Louise Bourgeois argues, "the needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin" (Parker 2010:xix). Reworking the position of women in Canadian society requires unity, solidarity, and the development of "motherselfhoods" which acknowledge, accept, and honor women's roles as mothers and as individuals. Although often underestimated, sewing has the capacity to empower women by allowing them to act out more capable and empowered mother subjectivities: bringing them together for social support and organization, enabling them to express and value their identities, and increasing their ability to negotiate their social positioning. Learning to sew, as a way of

learning to use and perceive the body differently, is one way in which the mother-self and the “social fabric” may be mended, strengthening women and their communities to improve the well-being of all.

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APPENDIX A INTERVIEW GUIDE

For Mothers:

- Tell me about yourself.
 - Tell me about your family.
 - What do you do for a living?
 - Where are you from?
- Why did you start attending the Sewing Circle?
 - When you first started coming to the Sewing Circle, what did you expect?
 - How is the Sewing Circle meeting those expectations?
 - What is your favorite thing about coming to the Sewing Circle?
 - What is your least favorite thing about coming to the Sewing Circle?
 - Has the Sewing Circle impacted your life in any way?
- Have you accessed other services at the Mothers' Centre? Which ones?
 - Why did you decide to start coming to the Mothers' Centre?
 - Why do you keep coming to the Mothers' Centre?
 - What aspects have been particularly valuable to you?
 - What do you think is still needed?
 - How has attending the Mothers' Centre impacted your mothering?
- What does well-being mean to you?
 - What do you do to promote your own well-being? That of your family?
 - Do you think that the Mothers' Centre and the Sewing Circle have contributed to your well-being? How?
 - What do you think could be done to improve the well-being of mothers in Saskatoon?

For Coordinators, Instructors, and Volunteers

- Tell me about your role in the Mothers' Centre.
- Why did you decide to start working with the Mothers' Centre?
- What do you think makes the Mothers' Centre valuable?
 - What are some challenges?
 - What needs still need to be addressed?
- What are the benefits of specific programming like the Sewing Circle?
 - How does their impact differ from that of the drop-in centre?
- How do the Mothers' Centre and the Sewing Circle contribute to women's well-being?
- Tell me about a time when the Mothers' Centre made a real impact in the lives of women.
- What benefits has working in the Mothers' Centre had for you?

APPENDIX B
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

Focus Group 1 (Week 3):

Engagement

- What are you making in the sewing circle?
- How did you find out about the sewing circle?

Exploration

- How much did you know about sewing before coming to the first Sewing Circle?
- When you first decided to start coming to the Sewing Circle, what did you expect?
- How is the circle meeting those expectations?
- What have been the most satisfying things you've learned so far?
- What is your favorite thing about coming to the Sewing Circle?
- What is your least favorite thing about coming to the Sewing Circle?

Exit

- What would you like the community grants committee to know about this Sewing Circle?

Focus Group 2 (Week 8):

Engagement

- What are you making in the Sewing Circle?

Exploration

- How is the Sewing Circle meeting your expectations so far?
- What have been the most satisfying things you've learned?
- What is your favorite thing about coming to the Sewing Circle?
- What is your least favorite thing about coming to the Sewing Circle?
- What do you see as the benefits of the Sewing Circle for yourself? Your family? Your community?
- How do you think a program like the Sewing Circle could contribute to health and well-being?

Exit

- What would you like the community grants committee to know about this Sewing Circle?

Focus Group 3 (Week 12):**Engagement**

- Overall, how was the Sewing Circle for you?
- Did it meet your expectations?

Exploration

- What were the most valuable aspects of the Sewing Circle?
- What was the most satisfying thing you learned?
- What was your favorite thing about the Sewing Circle?
- What was your least favorite thing about the Sewing Circle?
- What do you see as the benefits of the Sewing Circle for yourself? Your family? Your community?
- How do you think a program like the Sewing Circle could contribute to health and well-being?

Exit

- What would you like the community grants committee to know about this Sewing Circle?
- Do you have any recommendations for the next Sewing Circle?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about the Sewing Circle?